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THE CHANNEL

BY THE AUTHOR
OF "PATTY"

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PICTURES

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BY THE AUTHOR OF "PATTY."

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

FIDE ET FIDUCIA
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LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
NEW BURLINGTON STREET.
1873.

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249. q. 93.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS,
STAMFORD STREET AND CHARING CROSS.

CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

PAGE

JEANNE DUPONT 1

THE WIDOW MÉRAND 71

VICTOIRE'S FAITH 117

MADAME GERDER'S HUSBAND 149

THE STORY OF FRANÇOISE 197

THE MOTHER OF JACQUES 233

JEANNE DUPONT.

I.

ONE evening in the autumn of 1870 there were heavy hearts both in St. Roque and in the little neighbouring village of Laborde. The demand was everywhere for fresh soldiers. A levy had been raised in St. Roque and the country round it, and the chosen men were already on their way to join the French army.

Baptiste Lenord had been passed over more than once since the beginning of the war; he was the only son of a widowed mother, and at first war even respected this claim. But defeat and disaster modified rules and overlooked exemptions. The capture of Sedan had given the first shock to the confidence of the people. At this last levy it was asserted that Madame Lenord was stout in health and ablebodied—

quite stout enough in health and strength to support herself without the help of her son Baptiste. He could no longer plead exemption on the score of filial duty. So Baptiste went to swell the fast thinning ranks of his comrades. Neighbours said he seemed glad to go away, and they looked curiously at the widow Lenord when she drove her cart into St. Roque three days after his departure, and took up her accustomed place in the market, beneath the flèche of St. Pierre.

But Madelaine Lenord did not mean to afford her neighbours' curiosity any satisfaction. She stood behind the glowing array of fruit and vegetables, as stiff and cold as if nothing had happened to disturb her. No one looking at the square-faced, hard-featured woman in her dark blue gown and black apron, would have guessed that her heart was echoing still the measured tramp along the dusty road that led from the caserne eastward. Her large bony hands did not tremble as she piled orange and green-feathered carrots by purple onions and snowy turnips, or heaped up golden apricots beside bloomy plums. She seemed only intent on selling her goods to the buyers who thronged the market-place.

"Bah! at the next levy it is possible they will put us greybeards in the drawing; is it not so, ma bonne mère?"

Monsieur Jules Dupont, the well-to-do épicier of the Rue St. Jean, stood in front of the stall, and looked up into the face of the widow Lenord. He was forced to look up, she was so tall, and the projecting lilac handkerchief over her stiff-frilled cap added something to her great height.

The little épicier's black eyes twinkled; he rubbed his yellow, skinny hands lovingly against each other as he glanced upwards. It seemed to him that Madame Lenord's chin entitled her to share in the name greybeard; and, though he repressed a smile at sight of her frowning shaggy eyebrows, he could not keep his enjoyment quite within—it went into his fingers.

"Hein!"—Madame Lenord turned her stiff angular body so as to face the grocer. She looked at him steadily a moment before she went on—"It seems to me, my friend, that you would not be much of a mouthful for one of these

Prussian guns they tell us about. Listen"—she put her hand on his arm, for he turned yellow, and was moving on into the crowd that thronged the market-place—"I did not mean to say it if you had kept aloof; but since you are such an old vaurien that you come to see how a mother bears suffering, you must take more than you have come for, Monsieur Dupont."

The épicier caught a glance of her kindling eyes.

"My good mother, I have no time for talk." He tried to edge his sleeve out of the market-woman's strong, veiny fingers.

No use; she only tightened her grasp, and the épicier's self-contented, cunning face lengthened into a look of alarm as those blue steadfast eyes gleamed down more angrily and sternly.

"Listen, I tell you, Jules Dupont. I have known you from a boy; and when I know people, I know them inside as well as out. I never saw a thought in you which had not self on the top of it, and Jeanne is following in your steps. I warned my boy against her, but young men must always see with their own eyes. I am not grieving for Baptiste"—the proud old lips were pushed up with scorn. "Such a wound as love for your daughter could give must heal quickly; but, meantime, who knows? my Baptiste may soon be lying in his blood under the feet of the Prussians, and that blood will be on the head of your daughter Jeanne, monsieur." Her voice grew harsher, and the veins on her forehead stood out yet more plainly with the violence of the agitation she restrained, for Madelaine Lenord was too proud to weep before Jules Dupont, and she kept her voice from reaching other ears than the épicier's.

"Gently, gently, my good mother," said Dupont. He was aghast at this attack on such a well-to-do householder as himself, in the midst of his fellow-townsmen.

"I am never gentle, and you know it, Jules Dupont. As well may you seek herbs at the butcher's as gentleness from me. Ask your friend Marie, the dairy-woman, if her yellow cow is more gentle than usual when the butcher leads away her calf to the abattoir. I would cry shame on you if I did not think it was dulness more than malice that brought you here. But you may go." She held him another minute. "What I mean is, that if

Jeanne had not made St. Roque hateful to my son, he would have tried for an exemption; but he went like a willing sheep."

She let go her hold of Dupont's arm, and stood still and calm, not even looking towards the épicier. Dupont went on a few paces as if in rebound from her grasp; then he stopped, and brushed the sleeve she had held with the coat-cuff of the other. He made a grimace and walked back to Madelaine's fruit-stall with a sort of dance in his step.

"You are a woman"—he smiled, and rubbed his hands harder than ever—"and women are so often mistaken in judging. Is it not quite possible, my good woman, that your Baptiste is tired of petticoat government, and anxious to try a little soldiering for a change?"

He spoke in a loud voice, and several idlers pressed up to the fruit-stall. The old woman's lips trembled, and she pressed them tight to steady them; then she took a long look at the sneering, wrinkled, yellow face.

"If I am a woman, I cannot help it," she said. "You cannot help being a man, Jules Dupont; but you can help being a coward!"

A chorus of applause from the group round her was too much for the respectable épicier. His yellow face turned the colour of brick-dust, he left off rubbing his hands, and glared for an instant at Madelaine ; then he shrugged his shoulders, and was soon out of sight in the crowded market-place.

II.

MONSIEUR DUPONT'S shop is in the principal street of St. Roque; the house above it is among the few which have escaped improvement, and the projecting gable atop nods in close proximity to its opposite neighbour. Monsieur Dupont's is not a showy shop seen from the street, though when you get inside it you are at once impressed with the fastidious neatness of its arrangements.

There is a glass door at the end of the shop, and looking through this you see a pretty little room. The walls are painted pale green; the window is shaded by fresh muslin curtains, fastened by lace bands. Over the fire-place is a looking-glass, and in front of this is a handsome clock in bronze, with a bronze moderator lamp on each side. There is a round table in the middle of the room, and on one side a smaller table, with a bowl of gold fish and some geraniums and fuschias grouped round it. Near this table, with her back to the window, Jeanne Dupont is sitting at her embroidery-frame. She stoops over her work, hiding her face, but showing the smooth plaits of her glossy brown hair. Jeanne has not a well-shaped head, but towards the forehead it is full and broad, and it is well placed on her shoulders.

She starts as her father comes into the shop. She knows his fidgety, small-stepping tread, and she looks up. Jeanne is not pretty. She has a bright brown skin, with a rich colour glowing under her dark eyes ; but her mouth is wide, and her nose turns up at the end with that peculiar expression of sauciness, hastiness, and good nature, so inseparable from this conformation. The expression at this moment is unmistakably cross.

The glass door opens, and Monsieur Dupont comes in, and seats himself on the red velvet sofa opposite his daughter.

"Eh bien, Jeanne! I have news for thee." He rubs his hands, and half shuts his bead-like eyes. "Madelaine Lenord is not in a complimentary mood to-day. She says—the old toad!—that Baptiste was glad to get away from St. Roque, because at the same time he got away from thee."

At the name Baptiste the girl's mouth trembled, and her eyelashes drooped and quivered; but the bitter ending of Madelaine's message was too much. Jeanne's eyes flashed open in bright wrath, and her nose turned up yet more than usual.

"Madame Lenord is well set to work." She spoke so fast, that she could hardly get her words out. "Did she say that in the open market?"

"But—yes"—Monsieur rubbed his hands, and looked still more cheerful—"and our good neighbours here in St. Roque, and also out at Laborde, are no doubt kind enough to pity poor deserted Jeanne Dupont."

"Chut!" Jeanne stamped her foot imperiously, and then she sat still, twining her plump brown fingers together as if she were trying to plait them into some pattern. Monsieur fidgeted a little with two old-fashioned seals which hung at his watch-chain. He began to whistle softly, as if to himself, "Mourir pour la Patrie." Jeanne's brown skin grew suffused, and her eyes looked up full of angry fire.

"Father!" This came as an exclamation, and it seemed to act as warning to Monsieur Dupont. He left off whistling and playing with his seals, and looked gravely at his daughter. "Thou hadst best not rouse my temper. I know thou art trying to make me say I will marry Victor Devisme. Eh bien, voyons!" She got up and stood beside her high-backed low chair, grasping the rail atop with all the strength of her well-shaped hands. "I have not said No—I will not promise to say Yes; but thou shalt not taunt me into anything." She stood thinking. Her father watched her, closing his eyes till they looked like black slits. "Madelaine Lenord must indeed have changed if she could speak so cruelly," she said, more quietly. "Father, art thou sure——"

A sob came in the girl's throat, but she choked it back.

Monsieur Dupont laughed in the low chuckling way that was inseparable from his favourite pastime of rubbing his hands.

"I blame thee not, Jeanne; but thou needest not be so ready to catch fire. Never believe what thou dost not like, my child—it is a safe motto. I object not to thy disbelief—why should I ? I am quite willing to be convicted if I have not told the truth. Go to the market-place, my girl—there is yet time—and get the truth from Madelaine herself."

Jeanne bit her lips, and tears came to soften the hard light in her eyes.

"Father, there are times when I have wished—may the Holy Virgin forgive me, but I must wish it all the same—that thou couldest just for one hour, or less even, be cursed with my wild spirit; it may be thou wouldest then show mercy at a time like this. Thou canst not in earnest wish me to suffer this public mortification. Why, then, say words which make me mad and wicked ?" Dupont fidgeted under her earnest eyes. "Listen," she went on ; "thou hast bid me go to Madelaine. I will see her, and have the truth from her, but not in the market-place."

Monsieur sat looking like a Japanese idol; his thin, loose lips had relaxed from the grin which usually kept them strained into a line, and the lowermost hung down in open dismay. He had seen Jeanne petulant, vehement even, but she had never spoken with this highly-wrought earnestness. Her eyes did not flash; there was more of sorrowful appeal than of passion in her words.

She pinned the paper down over her embroidery, and passed out of the room, but Jules Dupont still sat with the same dismayed look on his wrinkled face. He had no moustache to hide the working of his mouth; he had very little hair even on his head, and the yellow skin on his bare crown likened him, in conjunction with his wide lipless mouth, to an unfledged thrush.

"What has she?" and then his black sharp eyes went inquisitively into every corner as if to find a clue to Jeanne's new behaviour. "This is new. Bah! it is time I was rid of her. She must be married without delay. She is a firebrand. My digestion is disturbed by her vehemence. She has not said No to my propositions; she is too well brought up to refuse a husband chosen for her by her father; and, ma foi"—he struck one hand energetically into the palm of the other—"what can she find to object? Bah! I did not think I had struck so hard." He caressed his injured palm as if it were some pet animal. "She cannot make an objection to

Victor Devisme. He has good looks, a good position, good manners. It is impossible that Jeanne can prefer a mere carpenter like Baptiste Lenord to a gentleman. Why, Victor has dined at the Préfecture. Baptiste is a great overgrown lout, without looks or manners. Jeanne will cure of this misplaced fancy."

The épicier pulled a little file out of his pocket, and proceeded to trim his nails. Mechanically he again whistled, "Mourir pour la Patrie."

III.

There is a long hilly street in St. Roque, with lime-trees on each side. It is almost in a line with the spires of St. Etienne; and it mounts upwards at a right angle with the street in which the famous old cathedral stands, till at its furthest extremity you get a glimpse of the tower of the Abbaye aux Dames. Some way up this hill you come upon a lonely, desolate-looking spot. Grey, quaint houses, chiefly untenanted, stand ghost-like about a large grass plot, with rows of chestnuts along its edges; and behind, shadowed by this dense foliage, and paved all round with hard obtrusive grey stones, is the little lonely church of St. Julien.

A young girl goes by the church with a rapid swinging walk. She stops and looks at the little grey, time-worn building.

"Father Pierre would tell me what to do," Jeanne sighed, and faltered. There was a chapter of unspoken, unsifted trouble in the steadfast brown eyes.

She was not long undecided.

"I will see Madelaine first," and on she went again.

Looking at Jeanne in her close-fitting black silk gown and simple straw bonnet with its white trimmings, she seemed indeed too refined for a carpenter's wife.

Her mother had been very superior to Jules Dupont, and she had lived long enough to place Jeanne in the convent, where she had been taught more than usually falls to the lot of girls of her class. The usual result had followed. Jeanne disdained the female society she mixed among and its frivolity. She cared far more for reading and refined pursuits than for dress and fashion; and she had scandalized a group of shopkeepers' daughters by asserting that Madelaine Lenord, in her simple market cloak and cap, was more of a lady than any of these flounced and panniered demoiselles.

Jeanne has one friend nearer her own age 17
than Madame Lenord—her former music-mistress at the convent, Mademoiselle Félicité Trudin—but she is never in St. Roque at this

time of year: she goes to stay with her old mother at Dives.

"If I could only see Mademoiselle Félicité," the girl goes on to herself, "I believe she would give me good advice. I used to wonder at that sweet sad depth in her eyes; now I know that is the mark love leaves behind him. Ah! when a woman's eyes are only bright and fiery, she knows nothing of real love."

Jeanne has a long weary walk on the dusty road before the diligence overtakes her. She wishes to go the whole way on foot, but this will take too long; she must be home again before dusk; so she gets into the empty vehicle, and is almost smothered by the dust it raises. On between hedges, giving glimpses of orchards jewelled with rich-hued crops; below, stubble on the ground—the iron foot of war had not yet trodden down these remains of wheat and barley harvest—for the thrifty Normans turn orchard ground to double use.

By degrees the trees grow scanty and stunted, the herbage on the hedge banks coarser, till at last the sand-hills come in sight, and the diligence stops at a cross-road.

Jeanne pays her fare, and then turns down the left of the cross-roads. A few minutes bring her to the sandy country about Laborde. It stretches on beyond the village, a waste of sand and blue mud-hills, till these last assume a more regular aspect, and, in the shape of a range of low cliffs, bound the plage of the fishing-cabins of Dives.

Jeanne looks wistfully on towards the sea; but Dives is far away from Laborde. She cannot reach it to-day—she has only time to see Madelaine Lenord.

The cottage is just like all the rest—white-washed, with a black door, a shingled roof, and a queer little dormer window peeping out among circling vine sprays and stone-crop, as if it was there on guard. Jeanne knows the cottage well. Her mother used to take her out to Laborde on summer afternoons, and then it was that she and Baptiste Lenord made acquaintance. He was learning his trade in his own village in those days, and had got good book teaching from Monsieur le Curé. He had not begun then to work for Monsieur Carmier, the chief ébeniste of St. Roque.

The girl's face changed rapidly in expression. She stood still at the door, without knocking.

"I will try and be patient; but it was shameful to say such a thing out in the market-place."

And then came a quick throb of pain—that pain that seems filled with prophetic instinct, telling it is only a herald of worse to come, so hard to bear, because we know it is self-inflicted. Jeanne had been wilful, rebellious all her life; but she had all her life been resolving to turn over a new leaf, and nothing serious had come of her frequent relapses; and now, just when she had only had a little quarrel with her lover, when she had been less passionate than usual, and when, in thinking over the cruel words she had said to Baptiste, it had seemed that a few days must make all right, the terrible summons had come, and Baptiste had gone away, it might be for ever.

"It is all the fault of the war. I said I did not love him, and I did not know I loved him so much. I did not think this torment would have come in my heart, or I would have asked him to forgive me on my knees. And he has gone without a word or a look!"

Jeanne looked indignant at her own weakness, and drew up her head, while she tapped at the door.

No one answered.

"She is perhaps out," and Jeanne lifted the latch.

Madelaine Lenord looked up in an instant, defiance in her face. The sight of Jeanne standing in the doorway had brought some of it, and the rest came from the consciousness of tears, and the swollen eyelids, which had been hidden between the old woman's hands.

Madelaine sat still; but she raised her head till it rested against the wall behind her, and looked steadily at Jeanne.

Wrought up as the girl was in the hush of those few moments, she saw, without noticing, how clean and spotless the wall looked, and the glitter of the few brass pans that hung against it.

Madelaine spoke first.

"Like father, like child. So, Jeanne Dupont, you've come now—is it not so?—to see how I grieve for the loss of my son. Why should I not grieve?" Her voice grew harsh as she looked at the face that had come between her and her boy. "A mother must be harder than a brute if she does not grieve to lose her own child; no triumph for you in that, mademoiselle."

Jeanne came forward suddenly, and took the widow's hand between hers. Madelaine drew it away.

"But, madame, do not be hard—do listen; has he not, then, left one word for you to say to me?"

Jeanne forgot that Baptiste's mother had no belief in her own love for him. She forgot everything but her longing to know whether her lover had forgiven her, and the old woman's harshness filled her with a bitter sense of injustice.

Madelaine rose up slowly; she seemed to tower above the quivering, dark-eyed Jeanne. The girl had clasped her hands together; she stood in the attitude of a suppliant. But the stern old woman utterly misread her purpose.

"I thought you were selfish, Jeanne Dupont, but not so bad as this. You trifle with an honest lad's heart, because he is weak enough to feed your pride, and then you drive him from you with your bitter, heartless words.

And you are so daring as to come and ask me at this hour if Baptiste is spaniel enough to cringe and fawn for your pity, to leave tender words and tokens for such as you! No, mademoiselle, your name was not spoken by my son. I said, 'What of Jeanne Dupont?' and he answered me, 'Be silent, my mother—nothing.' It was easy to see that he rejoiced in leaving St. Roque; he wished to escape the sight of you."

"Ah!"

The glow that had risen on the girl's dark cheeks faded, her hands fell apart and drooped beside her. Was not this the confirmation of her father's words?

"You are unjust. One day you will see how unjust. I came to tell you I was sorry to have caused his departure; but you throw my words back."

"Ta, ta, ta!" Madelaine looked scornful. "You make too much of Baptiste's sorrow, mademoiselle. Go home and grieve for your own pride and vanity; do not grieve for my son; you offended him—that was all. By this time he has forgotten you, Jeanne Dupont. He will come back; he will laugh that you could ever have had power to vex him. My son is not to be thrown away on a brown little chit of a vixen."

Perhaps Madame Lenord had surprised herself by her own sternness, or she may have felt unable to persist in it. She went to the door, and opened it for the girl to pass out.

Jeanne looked up at her, and went away without a word.

IV.

MONSIEUR DUPONT stood at his shop-door. The street was quieter than it had been in the time of peace; the market folk had gone home long ago; there was not left so much as a barrowful of plums. Opposite was the shop-window of Monsieur le Petit, with its shining plaits of hair and bottles of perfume and pomade; the gable atop of the three-storied house projected its quaintly-carved head as if it wanted to see into the street below. The house itself projected slightly, and thus narrowed in the street so as to form a closer fitting frame to the grey old St. Pierre, which filled the end of it.

Monsieur Dupont was not smoking—the habit, in his opinion, was an unclean one, and his great virtue was a spotless cleanliness; the care of his finger-nails and of his small remnant of hair was an absorbing employment; his dress, too, gave token, by its frequent variety in the way of waistcoats and neckties, of the attention bestowed on it.

"Dress," he observed, "costs money to purchase, time and taste to wear to the best advantage; and money and good taste are the only two things worth living for. How foolish and reckless, then, to taint and soil that which has so much value, by a saturation of poisonous smoke."

Moreover, Monsieur Dupont considered that eyes were given one to use in observing the conduct and fortunes of one's fellow-men, and he perhaps saw much more out of those bead-like eyes of his as he stood at his shop-door, each thumb in a waistcoat pocket, his feet drawn closely into the first position, bowing and smiling to almost all who passed him, than he would have seen if he had been smoking.

"Aha, my friend Victor! It is long, then, since you have come down the Rue St. Jean."

"Bon soir, monsieur."

The new-comer raised his hat, and stood still, with rather a sheepish, hesitating look.

Monsieur Victor Devisme was a clerk in the bureau of Monsieur le Préfet of St. Roque, and consequently, in such troublous times, a man of more importance than the wealthy épicier. He had a pleasant face—Belgian rather than French. Good, honest blue eyes, sunny, chestnut hair and beard, went well with his fresh, high-coloured complexion. He was taller than the épicier, but he was still only medium height. The cunning face of Jules Dupont did not show to advantage beside his frank, pleasant-looking companion.

"Well but, my friend"—the épicier looked slyer than ever—"you have not answered. Why is it, then, so long since you have come to see an old friend?"

The young man's colour deepened.

"Aha!"—monsieur winked his sly eye, and his mouth curved into a grin of intense enjoyment—"We understand. Is it not so? It was better, was it not, to give the papa time to arrange a little matter for us with mademoiselle?" He rubbed his hands and chuckled till Victor longed to choke him.

"Well, Monsieur Dupont, and what have you to say to me?" He spoke sharply, and monsieur vibrated on the points of his toes in sudden, nervous tremor, though he laughed, to show how very much at ease he felt; and as Victor Devisme did not feel in a laughing mood, it seemed to him that his companion—even though he was the father of Jeanne Dupont—was a wrinkled old idiot.

"Aha, that is what it is!" The frown on Victor's face quickened Monsieur Dupont's sentence. "Well, my good friend, my news is not much to tell; I have spoken to my daughter, and I have reason to believe the next step is to present you to her."

Victor left off frowning, but he did not look content.

"But, Monsieur Dupont, you know what I mean. Have you ascertained that Mademoiselle Jeanne will receive me with satisfaction?"

The earnest feeling in his face might almost have moved Jules Dupont; but he did not look up; his attention was concentrated on the polish of one of his little finger-nails.

"Ma foi!"—his shoulders went towards his large ears—"What will you? I have done my part. You can do yours, I suppose, without my help? Come again this evening.

Jeanne will be at home, and will be ready to receive you from me as her future husband. Allons."

Victor Devisme lingered. He could not believe the épicier's news. Jeanne Dupont had always been civil to him, but she had been cold too. He would have given much for one of the flashes of petulance he had seen her bestow on his sister Thérèse—flashes which had gained her from that staid spinster the name of vixen.

Frenchman though he was, Victor was too much in love not to crave a little more romance in his wooing than he felt assured of finding.

"I shall know this evening how she really feels," he thought. "Jeanne's is a tell-tale face. She is no hypocrite."

It seemed to the young man, who had till now led the monotonous and uneventful life of an official in a provincial town, that existence was turning into a fairy tale. As he reached the end of the street, he said to himself, "But it will spoil all to be obliged to ask Jeanne in the presence of her father;" and suddenly he turned the corner of the Rue Notre Dame, and there was Jeanne herself—

Jeanne who, instead of passing him with a graceful, self-possessed bow in return for his shy salutation, flushed deeply at sight of him, and stopped when he paused beside her.

"Mademoiselle"—his voice was eager and trembling, it went to the girl's aching heart at once—"I have received permission from monsieur your father to present myself at your house this evening. Have I also your permission, mademoiselle?"

Jeanne bent her head; tears were coming into her eyes, and she did not want Devisme to see them.

"Yes, yes, Monsieur Victor." She forced her lips into a smile, and hurried on past the angle of the street.

"Am I asleep or dreaming?" Victor rubbed his eyes, and then, as a girl going by with faggots on her head nearly knocked his hat off, he decided that he was awake, and that he was happier than he had ever been in his life before. Yes, the fairy-tale had begun.

It was well for the growth of this sudden happiness that Jeanne reached home while Monsieur Dupont had crossed over the way to advise with his crony, Madame le Petit.

A hare had been presented to her—a gift in which the épicier, who loved his stomach as much as he loved every bit of himself, was resolved to share, and he had gone to Madame le Petit to devise the best way of cooking it.

Jeanne took off her bonnet at the foot of the steep stairs, and swung it by the strings backwards and forwards as she mounted. She was asking herself why she was so foolish, so weak.

"Why should I grieve and crave for a love which never can be mine—which perhaps I never had, or I could not have lost it for just a few foolish, passionate words? Here is a man good and true, and loving too—whose eyes show me what I am to him. Why should I not make Victor Devisme happy? I can never be happy in the way I dreamed of; that is over. Why not trust that happiness may come with a man who I am certain loves me so much?"

V.

Days went by—so many, that they were weeks now; autumn had grown chill. The war was still raging fiercely. Victor Devisme was betrothed to Jeanne Dupont; but life was not quite the fairy-tale he had begun to think it.

His sister Thérèse shook her head. It was no wonder, she said, that Victor looked downcast. In such troubled times, when the war grew worse every day, instead of coming to the glorious ending that had been promised, when even to far-off St. Roque news of defeat and the death of the townsmen came weekly—how could folks have the heart to think of love and marriage? For her part, Thérèse thanked the Holy Virgin and the saints she was not troubled with such nonsense; she thought the occupation of women should be praying and fasting at such a time. Marriage was quite out of season.

Perhaps Thérèse was right. Joy jars in a public grief; and though in Normandy there was yet a strong belief in the ultimate triumph of the French arms, still rumours of defeat and disaster grew. No one could say how hearts became heavier; folk went about with saddened faces, and not all the proclamations and bland self-complacency of Monsieur le Préfet could dispel the gloom that began to brood over the town of St. Roque.

Jeanne was one of the first to feel its influence; she had rarely smiled since the evening when her father placed her hand in that of Victor Devisme. In one way she was grateful to the war. The duties of her lover's office had grown much heavier during these last days, and Victor could only spend a few minutes with her each time he came, and, with a pertinacity which irritated him, Jeanne always contrived that her father should be present.

Marie, the milk-woman, a good-natured, gossiping Picarde, told Jeanne one day that a letter had come to his mother from Baptiste.

"He is not far off"—her small black eyes shone with significance—"not farther than Rouen. Dame! What do I know? he may be nearer still."

Marie's flat brown face broadened into one huge smile. She stood looking at Jeanne with both hands resting on her hips, or at least on the breadth of blue-plaited woollen which represented them.

Marie was an outspoken body. All the world of St. Roque had heard of the love between Baptiste Lenord and Jeanne Dupont; and though Ma'mselle Jeanne had been hard-hearted enough to give Baptiste his congé, and was going to marry a gentleman, she might show a little interest in hearing about the poor fellow.

"And instead, ciel! she looks as proud as Madame Mérand herself, ma foi!" Up went the milk-woman's shoulders towards her ear-drops.

"Good morning, Marie"—Jeanne was turning out of the kitchen where the talk had been held—"I will send Sophie to you."

"Wait, ma'mselle." Marie considered that if Jeanne had grown unfeeling, it was her simple duty to make her know it. It was said in St. Roque that Marie, the milk-woman, spent quite as much of her time in teaching her neighbours as in selling milk, and reaped more "kicks than halfpence" in her philanthropic endeavours; but she had never before administered advice to Jeanne Dupont.

"Has ma'mselle heard the talk in the town this day?"

"I never listen to gossip." Jeanne kept her face turned towards the kitchen door.

"Gossip, ma foi! and ma'mselle speaks of gossip, when it is our men's lives I mean! There is news of fighting near us, ma'mselle. No one knows where the news began, but every one says so. It is quite near; not far off, at least, they say. Ah, ma'mselle! it is well for you who have no friends in the army; but for me, I have many friends there. The poor lads, I love them. I care for poor Baptiste Lenord. Ma foi, I think so!—he with his bright, black eyes and cheerful smile—it is all that is most sad—to think of him dead and cold, trodden under the feet of those cursed Prussians. They are cursed; they drink the blood of our men, and steal the food of our children. Dame! if I were then a man, I would make some of the butchering cowards bleed too!"

"Marie, who told you this news?"

Marie stood with open mouth and eyes. Jeanne Dupont had turned round suddenly, and had taken a firm grasp of the milk-woman's arm, as if she thought she would run away.

"Who told you our soldiers were fighting near St. Roque?"

Jeanne spoke doggedly, and she shook Marie's arm.

"Ma foi! that is what I have but now said to ma'mselle—there is a rumour. What will you? Does any one know how a rumour begins? It is like a mushroom; no one can say from whence it comes. It may be no more than—pouf"—she blew across the back of her hand, as if she saw a feather there—"but it may be true. Ciel! think, then, a little, my fine young lady, of the brave fellows we saw marching away to the sound of the drum. When I think that none of us, not even his mother, will ever again see Baptiste Lenord, my heart is like to burst. Ah, mon

Dieu, but it is the most unhappy chance! He was good. Ah, the poor lad!"

Marie put her black apron to her eyes. Jeanne waited a minute, and then she spoke calmly.

"There have been these rumours once—twice even—and they have not proved true, Marie. There has, perhaps, been some truth as to the fighting, but it has always been farther off than was said, and our townsmen have not been engaged in it. Only a fortnight ago you said the Prussians were close to Rouen."

"Ma foi!"—Marie's face was flushed with her eagerness to speak—"and what is it, mademoiselle, a fortnight now, a fortnight to come, in a war which goes on from bad to worse? It is only a question of days and of suspense. It is all very well what they say at the Préfecture—that the Prussians will have to cry 'Vive la République.' Chut!"—she snapped her fingers. "Mademoiselle must of course believe what is said at the Préfecture; it is natural, if it is not just, and it has become the duty of mademoiselle. But Monsieur le

Petit has a friend at Versailles, and this friend has written to Monsieur le Petit that the King of these monsters of Prussians is not a man at all, but a demon, and he will never go back to Berlin till he is master of all France. Ah ! but, mademoiselle, it is infamous. The old coquin, I could strangle him myself if he were only a man."

Marie wiped away her tears impetuously. Jeanne stood thinking. She did not love Victor Devisme, but his calm self-possession claimed her respect, and he had taught her to believe in the wisdom of the ruling powers. Yet though St. Roque had been kept ignorant, at the outset of the state of public affairs, each day was forcing on the minds of its citizens two plain facts, which came always in unison—the constant defeat and disaster of the French troops, and the steady success of their enemies, spite of enormous losses. So much of private interest had been distracting Jeanne's thoughts, that she had not realized, as many of her fellow-townsmen had realized, that actual war was approaching their city, and that each one of them might be brought face to face individually with its horrors. Marie's words made her shudder. She grew white suddenly.

"Then, if this news is true, the enemy will march west; they may come to St. Roque?"

"Monsieur le Petit says they will not reach us till they are sure of Rouen and Havre. Bah! Mademoiselle, if they come here, what can we do? We have no walls at St. Roque. They will eat us up like sheep. How can ma'mselle think of such a horror? It is bad enough that our men should die for us, without dying ourselves. Hark, ma'mselle!"

The kitchen was near the end of a passage leading into the street. There was a continued tramp of feet, and overpowering these sounds came the *Marseillaise* ringing its soul-stirring music to this refrain—

"Aux armes contre l'étranger,
Tous les Français sont Volontaires,
Quand la Patrie est en danger."

"It is nothing." Jeanne had recovered herself. "You know we have heard it before—only some recruits going to the caserne on their way to join the army. They can give no news. They come from the other side—from Rennes, perhaps."

"Dame! but they may know; it was a soldier, mademoiselle, who told me how that wicked old king shuts himself up with Bismarck and that old sorcerer Moltke, and makes charms with the blood of children—*our* children, mademoiselle Jeanne. Tiens! have I not lived in Brittany, and have I not heard of the monster of Laval? and I say to you that he has come to life again in our day. Monsieur le Petit has well said that the old coquin of Prussia should offer thanks, not to God, but to the devil—for it is Satan who is the Providence of that old sorcerer and of Bismarck."

"Was it Monsieur le Petit who told you this news about a battle?" Jeanne asked faintly.

"No, mademoiselle, I heard it in the market; and I looked for Madelaine Lenord, but I could not find her. She does not come to St. Roque on every market-day since she lost her boy. She used to come to see Baptiste. Hein! but, ma'mselle, it was a sad day when he went away, poor boy!"

This time Jeanne did not give any warning of departure—she went straight out of the kitchen and up to her own room. She closed the door and stood against it, trying to keep down agitation.

"I am foolish. I know this woman for a chatterbox and unscrupulous in what she says. She may have invented this rumour—then why do I let my thoughts rest on it?" She pressed her slender hand over her eyes; they were hot and dry. "It is true, I feel it. I cannot shut it out. I see only him, my Baptiste, lying there bleeding to death—mine—Ah, mon Dieu! have I not lost the claim to him?" She stood still, and presently she went on again. "I had not thought he would die; I thought only he would despise me, and he would marry some one else. It seemed to me, if I could fill my head with Victor Devisme, I should be safe—I should be a wife—I should not then die of jealousy in seeing Baptiste happy with some one else than me. Ah! how little I knew! and now, what has happened!" Both hands clasped her face, but the burning blushes spread and revealed themselves on the full brown throat, panting with the love that had been so cruelly restrained. "Ah, mon Dieu!—it happens thus. I am truly punished. I detest the sight of Victor, I shrink at the sound of his voice, and I love my darling more than ever. My Baptiste, my own well-beloved, if I could only once tell thee I have been true, though I seemed false! But he will die, and I shall never see him again."

That evening, when Victor Devisme came to the Rue St. Jean, he was surprised at the change in Jeanne. She was no longer silent and reserved, she questioned him about the Government, about the position of the troops, the hopes of success; and when he had given the desired information, she scandalized him by her want of patriotism.

"It is a mistake to go on with this dreadful war," she said. "We have got rid of the Emperor—I do not know what harm he did, but I am willing to believe he began this war wrongly. But if he were wrong, why do we imitate him? why do we fight against fate? why sacrifice all our men to these Germans, who are too strong for us?"

Even Jules Dupont's cynicism stirred at this.

"Ta-ta-ta! thou art a woman! But was

France ever conquered? What do I say? Has she not always triumphed? And is it possible that a herd of brutal, beer-swilling peasants should trample on the bravery which has been renowned since the days of Charlemagne? Ma foi! Jeanne, it is too much! Why, the armies are preparing to march on Paris and unite forces; and then, where will be the triumph of the barbarians? Hemmed in between our soldiers and the city, they will not be allowed to escape—they will perish miserably, trampled under the feet of our advancing braves."

Monsieur Dupont rubbed his hands softly together as he rounded off these words, but Jeanne did not listen; she was stitching at her embroidery as if her life depended on the number of leaves she added to her roses. Victor Devisme lingered and lingered, but she had no more words to give him. Her hand lay passive in his when he bade her good-night. She made no attempt at reply to the warm clasp in which he held her fingers.

VI.

Two days passed. Victor came to the Rue St. Jean on the second evening. He found Monsieur Dupont drinking orgeat in the little parlour behind the shop, his yellow face wrinkled as he pored over a map.

Devisme answered the épicier's questions as to the day's news at the Préfecture, and then he looked restless.

"Where is Jeanne?"

"Ma foi!"—the épicier grinned till his face resembled a shrunken orange—"she has a headache; she has been in her room all day; but you can ask Sophie if she will see you."

Devisme went into the passage, but he met Sophie coming downstairs. Mademoiselle had sent her to say she was not not coming down to-night. Mademoiselle had headache; she was going to bed. She had forbidden that any message should be sent her. Sophie gave this last part of the message with severe emphasis. For the first time since he had been accepted as Jeanne's lover Victor's pride rose. It was evident that Jeanne wished to avoid him; and ever since that parting, two nights ago, the young man's heart had been filled with an aching longing. His suit made no progress; he was no surer of Jeanne's love than he had been at the beginning. He had resolved to appeal to her, and ask her why she had promised to be his wife if she had no intention of satisfying the love which consumed him. He loved her so much, that hope was strong in him; and even while his heart ached, there had been a wild thrill of delight at the vision of all that this appeal might lead to, for Victor had determined to ask Monsieur Dupont for his absence. He believed that if he had found courage to do this earlier, he and Jeanne might have come to a better understanding than was possible under the sneering, observant eyes of the épicier. He had come to the shop full of this resolve, and now all his hopes were dashed to the ground and shattered by such a message.

He turned from Sophie haughtily, and went out of the house without going to bid Monsieur Dupont good evening.

Sophie put her head on one side. She was a small thin creature, who adored her young mistress and snubbed her old master alternately. She looked on Monsieur Devisme as an ally of the grocer, and therefore an unsuitable match.

"Hein!" she said, "they say love is blind; it seems that love has made that young clerk blind and stupid too. Why, mademoiselle Jeanne gets paler every day; she hates the very sight of him—the staring owl. When it was Baptiste Lenord, ma foi! she was like sunshine. Why did she take this one, ma foi! I know not. It it is not to be believed that a young demoiselle should give scandal by changing one lover for another, and then not please herself after all."

But Sophie was different from Marie the milk-woman. Sophie was old, and a Parisian born, and she knew that a girl crossed in love must be left to battle with her own heart in peace.

Jeanne's swollen eyelids did not tell of a peaceful night. She came down next morning later than usual, and she gave such sharp, irritable answers, that her father was glad to escape into his shop. He told Sophie that he should not be in for dinner, and that she must wait on customers, if any came in, after five o'clock.

Jeanne felt relieved when she heard of her father's absence. She dreaded inquiries and rebukes for her avoidance of Victor. She had not yet decided how to act, and she felt that interference would rouse her into vehemence.

Monsieur Dupont's was a corner house, and the windows of the little parlour at the back of the shop looked into a side street. Jeanne stood by the open window in the vacant state that so surely follows great mental suffering. Her eyes were fixed on the white wall of a house opposite—a whitewashed, bare space, with green persiennes on the first floor. She stood some minutes gazing, but, seeing nothing, she could not have said the house before her was white or black; and then, before any object darkened the bare blank space, a slight shiver ran through Jeanne, and her vision came back. Came back, and seemed fixed, so intense was the straining gaze, on a figure—a man, apparently a drunkard, for he staggered forward, then sideways, on the round knobbed pavement, and at last flung up his arms and reeled against the white wall with a groan.

"Au secours, Sophie, au secours!"

That was all Jeanne said; and then she sprang on a chair, and let herself drop into the side street from the open window. She saw no one else; she darted across, clasped both arms round the fainting man and kissed him.

"My own—own Baptiste!"

But Baptiste did not know her. His head drooped on her shoulder; he seemed changing into lead. Instead of supporting him, Jeanne felt that she must sink on the pavement beneath his weight.

"Parbleu! Leave him there, ma'mselle. He is not women's work as he stands there. Voyons, voyons, friend Baptiste! Stand up. What is it? Lend a hand, then, Ferdinand."

It was fortunate for Monsieur le Petit that the tall garçon of the Hôtel Sainte Barbe was passing by. The hairdresser's own round squat figure, spite of its strength, must have been overbalanced by the inert frame of the young soldier.

"Bien," said Ferdinand glibly. "I hold him; and what is then to be done with him, monsieur?"

Jeanne had disengaged herself from Baptiste, but she stood close by, with a calm face.

"Monsieur le Petit, he is dying! will you take him into your house? He should come in here"—she pointed across the way—"but you know my father; and, then, your door is quite at hand. He shall be no trouble to you; I will nurse him. Oh, monsieur, you will not leave him to die in the street—Baptiste, whom you have known all his life!" There was agony in her voice.

Monsieur le Petit's face became ludicrous. He had a secret admiration for Jeanne Dupont, and a hearty liking for Baptiste Lenord; but he had a strict regard for "les convenances" and a most wholesome awe of his wife. He knew that Madame le Petit had aided and abetted her gossip, Jules Dupont, in making the match between Jeanne and Victor Devisme. She had denounced Baptiste as a mere carpenter, quite unworthy to be allied to such a man as the épicier. Moreover, madame kept her husband's purse, and kept it shut against any hospitality to guests not chosen by herself.

"If you will not"—Jeanne spoke in a hard, desperate voice—"then bring him to us. I will dare everything. My father even will not turn a dying man out of doors."

"Diable!"—Ferdinand had been looking close at his burden—"we must be quick, monsieur. Lenord is bleeding from the side here."

He pointed to a large dark mark on the blue uniform. Instinctively Jeanne put her hand there, and drew it back blood-stained.

The hair-dresser forgot his wife and his scruples—forgot all but the impulsive French nature—which determined him to risk everything but his honour, and this he felt to be implicated in succouring a wounded soldier.

"Wounded! mon Dieu! Run, ma'mselle!" he exclaimed; "send my man Alexis to help, and tell Nanine to be ready."

In the midst of his excitement it was a soothing reflection to Monsieur le Petit that his wife was dining at her mother's in the company of Monsieur Dupont; there was no chance of her return before evening.

Jeanne hurried on into the Rue St. Jean. She had only to cross the road to Monsieur le Petit's house; but at the corner her gown was pulled by some one, and she stopped.

"Let me go; I can't stay an instant." Jeanne looked up at her hinderer. It was Thérèse Devisme.

"What are you about, Jeanne? Do go quickly indoors, and leave this soldier, whoever he is, to the men who are with him. You look wild, mon enfant. Victor would not be pleased to see you bareheaded in the open street."

"Let me pass!" Jeanne's eyes flashed at her future sister. "It is Baptiste, I tell you, and he is bleeding to death."

Mademoiselle Devisme stood in open-mouthed horror. She had always considered Jeanne wilful; but there was a flagrant daring in this proceeding which took her breath away.

Baptiste Lenord!—the very person Jeanne ought to avoid, now that she belonged to Victor, and, instead, she was actually disgracing herself by running about the streets telling folks in a wild way that he was wounded.

Thérèse had been putting up prayers that morning at St. Etienne for her wounded countrymen; but her patriotism succumbed for the moment. "Wounded! What else can soldiers expect? Jeanne ought to be ashamed to make such a fuss about a wound!" Thérèse had not lost sight of Jeanne while she stood murmuring at the corner of the by-street. She saw her go into the hairdresser's shop and summon his assistant, and then a moment after Nanine, Monsieur le Petit's servant, came flying down the street.

"She has sent for Dr. Roussel herself. Jeanne is undoubtedly mad," said Mademoiselle Thérèse.

But a knot of idlers was gathering, and by the time the three men had borne Baptiste Lenord into the shop, quite a busy little crowd filled the street between the house of the épicier and that of Monsieur le Petit.

Mademoiselle Devisme could not form one of such a group, and she went home, full of outraged propriety.

VII.

THE doctor had come, and had said it was a very serious case. The loss of blood had been frightful. It was evident that Lenord had travelled some distance in his wounded state, and there was little hope he could rally from the exhaustion.

"You will send for his mother?"

At first Jeanne had shrunk from the doctor's gaze; now she met it fully. There was such a quivering, hungering despair in those dark brown eyes, that Dr. Roussel winced as from the sight of a starving man.

"Why? He is unconscious; he may never know any one again. If Madame Lenord comes she will nurse him herself. Why should I yield up the care of him to any one?"

"Mon enfant, because this is not your place, and it is Madelaine's." He put his hand on Jeanne's, to quiet the interruption she tried to speak. "You think it is yours; but just now you are carried out of yourself; you cannot see things as they are. I owe it to your father and to Monsieur Devisme, for whom I have a profound respect"—he bowed—"to tell you you ought not to be here. Do not fear, Baptiste shall be well cared for."

Jeanne stood a minute, hard and defiant; but there was nothing irritating in the doctor's manner; his grave eyes looked full of pity for her. Her heart, too, was over-burdened; it was a relief to yield to its longing for sympathy. The slender fingers the doctor held closed suddenly on his, and he felt Jeanne's warm kisses on his hand.

"God bless you, monsieur! You are good; you have some pity; you will not drive me mad. If you knew how I have sinned against Baptiste—how, when I saw him there suddenly, like a spirit, in the street, it seemed to me he had come back to St. Roque to show to me that I had murdered him by my fierce, hard temper; Oh, Monsieur Roussel, see into my heart, if you can! I know I am of little use; but think what it is to me to be able even to watch him on my knees, to wipe his lips, or do the slightest service! Why will you take this consolation from me?"

"Well, well"—the doctor stroked her head and thought a minute—"perhaps you may come from time to time and see how we go on. But his mother must be sent for; it is her right."

"And if she comes, do you know what she will do? She will send me away at once from Baptiste."

"No, she will not"—Dr. Roussel smiled—"I am master here at present, my child; and if you are quiet and self-controlled, you may be of use; but remember, you have no *right* here."

He was surprised at Jeanne's answer. It came in a sad, subdued voice—

"No, it is true; I have no right here! I forfeited that by my own wickedness!"

"Hum! I wonder how long this new mood will last?" thought the doctor.

Monsieur le Petit undertook to fetch Madelaine himself; he was glad of a pretext for being absent when his wife and Monsieur Dupont should return.

Jeanne sat beside her charge, gazing fondly at the loved, changed face, so still and deathlike, with rigid lines of pain about the eyes and mouth. By-and-by Nanine came in on tip-toe to tell her she was wanted. Jeanne shook her head and pointed to the bed. Some one put Nanine aside and came gently into the room. It was Dr. Roussel.

"Go down," he said to Jeanne; "I will stay till you come back."

Jeanne wondered at her own obedience; but she went.

Victor had come to see her; he was standing at the foot of the stairs. He looked very pale, but he did not speak; he opened the door of Madame le Petit's salon and signed to Jeanne to go in there. Victor had a patient, much-enduring temper; but dissatisfaction with Jeanne had been daily growing, her avoidance had stung him deeply, and his sister's news had just been the spark wanting to kindle a strong tempest of indignation and wounded love. And yet when he looked at Jeanne, his love was as strong as ever—stronger, for jealousy gave keenness to his determination that she should be his wife. He did not even say Bon jour, or attempt to take her hand.

"You know why I have come!" he said.

"No, not quite." She looked honestly at him, and he saw the sorrow in her eyes. It only increased his jealousy.

"I have come to take you to your home, Jeanne. This house is not a fit place for you to stay in; you are compromising yourself. Why, even Madame le Petit is not at home."

"I cannot go away, Victor. You are angry; you have the right, and I must bear your anger."

He was very angry now; he flushed a deep red.

"You must come from here, I say. The man you are nursing has the doctor, and will soon have his mother. It is wholly unnecessary that you should stay here, and it is wrong. Jeanne, listen; have some consideration for me: you have promised to be my wife, and it is not your place to be running about after wounded soldiers and nursing them." His pride kept back any show of jealousy; but Jeanne's frank nature burst forth—

"I am sorry, Victor; but it is not because he is a wounded soldier that I say I must stay here. It is because he is Baptiste. I cannot talk any more to you now; I must go to him. I do not blame you—I do not expect you to forgive me; but I must stay with Baptiste."

Victor stood in front of her so that she could not pass; he was pale with anger, but Jeanne felt dead to fear.

"You shall not stay here, I tell you. I put myself aside. Even if you were nothing to me, a young girl like you cannot remain with a wounded soldier unless she is a nurse or a Sœur. You are excited, or you would know it too. Be reasonable. Come home, and all will go well. He took her hand. Jeanne drew it away.

"I will not go away," she said firmly.

For a moment Victor felt that he must snatch her up in his arms and save her from her own wilfulness by carrying her across the street; but something in her manner restrained him—she seemed sorrowful, not angry. Was she sorry for him or only for Baptiste?

"Ah, Jeanne!" he said, "have you, then, no thought for me? Me, your promised husband, you avoid and neglect, to devote yourself to a man who himself gave you up." Jeanne trembled and grew pale; but Victor went on in an agitated voice—"It has come to this between us, that I must ask you if you think a man who really loves, who has the feelings and spirit of a man, can stand by tamely and see his promised wife bestowing herself, without reserve or shame, on some one else? If no other feeling will weigh with you, Jeanne, humanity

—sympathy for the torment you make me suffer—should restrain you." He waited for her answer.

"I am very sorry, Victor; but please let me go!"

"You have not listened," he said angrily. "I see that I am as indifferent to you as one of the stones in the street. Oh, Jeanne; why did you accept my love? why did you promise to become my wife? You have never loved me; you have only mocked me by hopes you never meant to fulfil. I loved you long ago, but not as I love you now. If you had told me you belonged to some one else I would have tried to cure myself; now it is hopeless. You must marry me, Jeanne, or you destroy me."

The pain had grown deeper in the girl's face. At first it had seemed cruel and hard of Victor to keep her from Baptiste; but Jeanne was not wholly selfish. Though she had so long been the slave of her own will, Victor's reiteration was rousing her from the one absorbing thought; suddenly it seemed to her that she had wronged him as much as she had wronged Baptiste. He was surprised when she took his hand and held it quietly:

"You should not love me, Victor. I am not worth your love." The tears came rushing to her eyes. "You must not—you cannot love a girl who has acted as I have acted towards you. You will not forgive me; I cannot expect you should. I see my fault. I will tell you the truth at last, which I ought to have told sooner. Do you remember that evening I met you, and you asked me if I wished you to pay us a visit? I know not how I looked, but my heart was on fire. I had been cruelly misunderstood. I had humbled myself—ah, Victor! You do not know what it costs a girl like me to humble herself!—and I had been repulsed! I was bruised—heartsore! You offered me consolation, tenderness, soothing, and my poor torn soul wanted these things; and I was greedy enough, selfish enough, to rob you of your gifts, knowing that I could make no return!"

The flush came back to Victor's face, and the softening which Jeanne words had brought there faded away.

"Do you mean to say," he said sternly, "that you never meant to marry me when you promised to be my wife?"

"Even that would have been less sinful." Jeanne's voice was broken with sobs. "Do not spare me, Victor; I deserve the worst you can say or think! Yes, I meant to marry you; but I knew I could never love you! I never really left off loving Baptiste! I laid all the blame on Madelaine Lenord; and sometimes lately, when I have pictured myself as your wife, and Baptiste returning to claim my love, I have felt that I must forget all honour and duty, and go to him, if he would take me. Victor drew back a step. "No," she went on eagerly, "I wrong myself, though that is difficult. I do not think God would have let me fall so low; but the feeling has told me how fierce the fight would have been, and that I should have deserved to have been left to my sin if I had tempted it! Oh, Victor! don't look so hard, so stern. I deserve it, but I cannot bear it! Won't you forgive me?"

In that moment Victor's face was to Jeanne like a sentence of judgment. How often she had turned away in weary shrinking from the love she saw there, and now, that she read in his stern expression the alienation she had longed for, it seemed as if she must win him back at least to friendship.

"No, I cannot forgive you," he said harshly. "I must still love you, I cannot help it; and if you would leave Lenord and come to me now this minute, I am fool enough, infatuated enough, to take you, Jeanne; but that is the only price of my forgiveness, and you are not in earnest when you ask for it. You are——" He stopped and looked at her fixedly, then he cried out bitterly, "Go away; I don't want to be hard on you, but it is you that have made me hard yourself."

"God bless you, Victor! Will you not say good-bye? Ah, some day you will believe that I have punished myself most of all."

He gave no answering sign, and she went away slowly, with none of the gladness of release she had looked for.

VIII.

Madelaine came and took her post beside her son; but Dr. Roussel spoke to her earnestly before she saw Jeanne, and the stern old woman tolerated the girl's presence, though she seemed unconscious of it.

Days passed by, and Baptiste still lay senseless. Monsieur le Petit went about in a depressed and crestfallen state. Marie, the milk-woman, asserted that the hairdresser's ears had been boxed by his irascible wife on her return from her mother's. According to the same popular authority, Monsieur Dupont had been across to see Jeanne, and there had been a long and warm dispute between the épicier and his daughter; but Jeanne persisted in her attendance beside Baptiste. Folks talked and wondered, and did not know what to think. Mademoiselle Thérèse was questioned. She had been communicative enough on the day of the wounded man's arrival, but now she became suddenly dumb. She even told one of her inquisitive visitors that Monsieur Victor would resent scandalous talk of Jeanne Dupont, or any inquiry into the relations between the épicier's daughter and himself. So the gossips were forced to wait till the death or recovery of Baptiste Lenord should show how matters were really going to turn out.

The two women seemed to be vying with each other in self-devotion to Baptiste. Hitherto they had watched unwearily night and day, but on the third evening the old woman's eyes grew heavy. She moved restlessly in her chair, but the drowsiness took stronger hold upon her; her head drooped, sank gradually, gradually, till the neck bent under its weight, and she nearly fell forward on the floor.

There had been little speech between the watchers; a few necessary questions and answers—that was all. Madelaine's steady avoidance of Jeanne had been strictly maintained.

As she fell, Jeanne started forward and caught her; the old woman roused and shook herself free. But the girl's heart went out to her: she yearned to be at peace with Baptiste's mother.

"Sleep a little, ma mère—it will do you good. You can trust me to watch. Is it not so?"

Madelaine frowned, and then common sense got the better of her.

"I must sleep," she said, half sulkily, "or I may be found unwakeful when I am most needed."

She threw her apron over her face, leaned back, and was asleep almost at once.

Jeanne went up to the bed. Dr. Roussel had spoken more hopefully. He had said consciousness might return; and already, more than once, Jeanne had fancied she saw a quivering movement in the sufferer's eyelashes. If she might only be alone with him at his first awakening! And the next minute she shrank from it. Baptiste had perhaps heard of her promise to Victor Devisme—he might turn from her in anger; and then she looked at the pale suffering face, and it seemed as if no such earthly feeling could ever again visit Baptiste Lenord. Might not his spirit even now be trying its wings for flight, away for ever?

Jeanne knelt beside the bed, and gave way to an agony of tears. She had had to bear so much, to hide her grief away, and be so entirely calm and self-contained under Madelaine's eyes, her heart felt nearly bursting with pent-up sorrow. She did not know how long she had knelt there, when a touch roused her. She started up. She scarcely knew what she expected, but she saw that Madelaine had awakened and was standing over her. Jeanne followed the old woman's eyes to the bed. Baptiste was awake and conscious.

She had wished for Madelaine's absence—she had thought her own joy would be beyond all power of control; but, like many another impulsive woman, Jeanne found she could not forecast her feelings. Instinctively she hid her eyes from Baptiste's sweet, loving look, and shrank behind Madelaine. The tall old woman bent over the bed, and whispers passed between the mother and son. Baptiste looked lovingly at his mother, and pressed her hand, but his eyes strayed away. Madelaine gave a little sigh. The sternness had left her face when she turned to look at Jeanne. But Jeanne had departed.

"I will bring her to thee, my boy."

Madelaine had not far to go. Jeanne stood in the dark passage outside, her head pressed against the wooden wall.

"Come, my child—he asks for thee;" and Madelaine put her hand on the girl's shoulder.

It seemed to Jeanne that she was in a dream. She, who had so sorely wronged both mother and son, to be thus claimed by them both!

"Ma mère!" she held up her face for Madelaine's kisses, and she felt tears come with them.

Madelaine had got to the stairs, but she turned back with this caution, "Thou wilt remember his weakness, my child."

Jeanne nodded, and went swiftly to the bedroom. Madelaine sighed again as she went downstairs.

"But I am a thankless old good-for-nothing. Have I then forgotten that parents are made for children, not children for parents? The birds make nests for their eggs and for the little ones who break the eggshells, but when the young birds are strong on the wing the home-life is ended. No; a child is given us to rear and to love, but we must be content to rear him for others, and to give him all our heart when he can only give half his. But my child is not for any of us much longer. Poor Jeanne! she is not as ready to yield him as I am. She has not learned yet the Love that is waiting for Baptiste; she does not know—how can she, poor child?—that It is more than she can give him."

Jeanne was kneeling again beside the bed. Baptiste stretched his hand out feebly—oh, how feebly!—and she hid her eyes on it and devoured it with silent kisses.

"My beloved," he said faintly, "look at me."

Jeanne raised her head timidly, and her eyes stole to his face—they rested there conscience-struck, yet brimming over with her love. The answering love she met drew her onwards—drew her arms tenderly around him till his head rested on her bosom. Baptiste gave a deep sigh of relief. Jeanne's tears fell like rain; some drops touched his forehead.

"Why dost thou cry, my Jeanne? I am happier than I ever thought to be again. I am in thy arms—I can feel thy heart beat—thou art mine still—my own, is it not so?"

"Yes," she sobbed; "but it is only because thou forgivest me. Thou art so merciful; but thy forgiveness cannot wipe out my sin. Oh, my Baptiste! I can never be really forgiven."

"Hush!" His voice was faint, and he paused. Then he went on, hesitating between each word, "See, Jeanne, I shall not talk much to thee—I have no power. It may be in the blood dropping—dropping always from my heart, in that long journey home—some evil thoughts, some evil passions, have dropped too. The good God ordered all this, my well-beloved. We both sinned against Him by our angry words — I was also wicked. We made our own sorrow, my child. Do not cry so much; the end would have come—the end was made long ago—kiss me, my wife—my Jeanne. I can never have thee now, but thou art mine always."

She kissed him fervently, reverently, and then they kept still. He said sometimes, "My Jeanne," "She is mine always;" sometimes "God be thanked;" and then her tears came welling forth silently.

Madelaine crept in after a while, but there was no more speaking for Baptiste; he had fought his last fight, he had spent his last strength in that weary journey home; but his eyes spoke tenderly, after the power to speak was gone.

It seemed to the sorrowing, penitent heart of Jeanne that those loving looks were more than she could bear.

And so the two women watched beside the bed; but it was Jeanne that the dying eyes sought—her hand that the feeble fingers clung to till the end.

"It was hard for me, but it was right and just, monsieur,"—Madelaine was relating the scene to the docteur Roussel, tears streaming over her hard-featured but tender face. "Monsieur le Curé made me see it when he came away from my boy. Baptiste had nothing to forgive me, but he had to heal that broken heart before he went away, and his time was short. Ah, Monsieur Roussel! have you heard that Jeanne has left her home? she is going to be a nurse for the rest of her sorrowful life. She says the sick and wounded will want all the time and strength she has. Monsieur"—Madelaine whispered the rest—"the poor child can never forget her sin against Baptiste."

THE WIDOW MÉRAND.

THE WIDOW MÉRAND.

A STORY IN TWELVE PICTURES.

I.

It is evening in St. Roque. Broad August moonshine silvers the grey gables of the quaint old Norman houses—silvers the exquisite flèche of St. Pierre and the empty booths of the fruit-sellers in the market-place beneath, and brings into dark distinctness, at the far end of the long picturesque street, the twin spires of severe, frowning St. Etienne.

"I must take yet another turn," says Monsieur Alphonse Rendu to himself. He lights a fresh cigar, and walks back towards St. Etienne.

Moonlight and the reflection from a cigar are neither of them flattering to the complexion; so it is better to follow Monsieur Rendu until he passes the old Cathedral of St. Etienne and turns into the great square beyond; the square is full of lamps, and here he is so obliging as to sit down on one of the benches under the lime-trees, and take off his hat, and we get quite a good look at his face.

Pas si mal! And yet he is not what can be called handsome. He is young; he has honest blue eyes and a benevolent forehead, and a good mouth—a little severe, perhaps, but his moustache and beard curl over it so playfully that you cannot find much fault, as your eyes go wandering up, and you note how well the crisp auburn waves of his hair match with the beard. If his face were not so flat and his nose less broad, Monsieur Rendu would, after all, come under the objectionable denomination, "handsome." He does not think the word objectionable. Listen to his thoughts as he sits smoking, in the broad moonlight of the Place St. Etienne:

"Yes, she is very handsome! Her eyes are as bright as diamonds and as dark as velvet, but then they have the hardness of diamonds. But why am I a fool? can it signify whether a woman's eyes be hard or soft, so long as they are full of love for me? and Madame Mérand gives more than love to her husband, she gives him a home—an état. Well, what do I want with these? have I not enough to pay for lodging and clothes, and food enough and to spare, out of my own earnings?" He rises and paces up and down till he has finished his cigar, and then he still paces up and down, whistling softly. "Why do I think of marriage? I am happy as I am. If I could hope—but no, no, no! *She* is as cold as a little stone, and as proud as——ah! it is hard that, in this life, we cannot have things as we choose."

Having given birth to this surprising discovery of hardships, Monsieur Alphonse takes his way back into the Rue Notre Dame, and then goes on past the Hôtel Ste. Barbe, to his lodging over the shop of Madame Bobineau, that well-known perfumer and glover at the corner of the Place St. Pierre. To his lodging and to bed, but not to dreams of handsome-eyed widow Mérand, the wealthy proprietor of the Hôtel Ste. Barbe. The dreams of Monsieur Alphonse are of a young face with a pale clear skin and large wondering eyes—eyes that have no fixed beauty in them, though they haunt the memory—eyes that take fresh meanings as fresh emotions lighten in them. "Célie!" this young clerk murmurs in his sleep, and "Célie" is not the name of Madame Mérand.

II.

NEXT morning is a festival, and Madame Mérand's dark oval face does indeed look very handsome as she hurries home from early mass. She likes to be at home again, settled in her little parlour opposite the salle-à-manger by the time her regular visitors come in and breakfast. This parlour is a small room for so queenlike a woman, but it commands the whole of the arched entrance, and she can overlook from it the courtyard of the inn.

She looks very handsome, as she sits near the open door; her plain black stuff gown fits her perfect shape so easily, and the tiny cambric collar and cuffs are snowy in their fineness. She wears coral earrings and a brooch to match, of the simplest form; a rich plait of dark glossy hair circling her well-shaped head; and yet Madame Mérand cannot look simple—with all this plainness, she is like a queen.

The guests pass in and out: she bows to some, to one or two she rises and curtsies; but generally she gets up and retreats into her little room.

A young man is coming out of the salle; he bows to madame, and smiles.

She curtsies, and then her lips move. He cannot hear, and has to go into the little parlour before he can understand what she says.

"My neighbour, Monsieur le Petit, is going to Cabourg-les-bains on Sunday," says madame; "he has room in his char-à-banc, if you, monsieur, will accept a place; it is very pleasant at Cabourg."

And then the bright dark eyes look at Monsieur Rendu with an intensity of expression that troubles him.

Troubles him only for a moment; Monsieur Rendu thinks of the fresh sea-breezes in contrast with the furnace-like heat that comes in through the arched entrance.

"Ma foi!—yes, it must be very pleasant. Madame, I return many thanks to Monsieur le Petit, and I am enchanted to accept his offer."

Monsieur Rendu bows and smiles devotedly, and then sallies forth to the banking-house. The widow looks after him, and she sighs.

Madame Mérand can quit her parlour now

and go up to her own room. There is nothing more to wait for. She paces up and down, a different woman altogether from the calm, self-possessed owner of the little parlour of the Hôtel Ste. Barbe.

"How cold he is! Does he love me—or has he no feeling, or does he love some one else? Ah, no, he cannot. He likes me—he never shuns an opportunity of talking to me—but there it ends. Oh, mon Dieu! how much longer is this torture to go on?"

She stops before the looking-glass; a proud smile curves her lips, usually too firm in their chiselling. "He *must* love me!" the beautiful woman murmurs; "but he dares not show his love because he is poor. Poor fellow! it is hard for him. I will make it more easy."

And yet her heart aches still—aches with that incessant hunger so hard to appease—the hunger of a love which has given itself unsought. Looking at Madame Mérand, it is difficult to think this can be her case—more difficult to realize that she will fail in attaining anything on which she is determined.

There is power as well as passion in those dark, flashing, resolute eyes.

III.

Old Madame Bobineau makes a good contrast to Madame Mérand. She is Norman born, and has long ago lost every tooth in her head. Her face, in colour and wrinkles, puts one in mind of a peach-stone; while the face of the young girl she is scolding, on this sunny August morning, may serve as counterpart to the bloom on the peach. The girl is very fair; as she lifts her large wondering eyes to the old woman's face, a tinge of soft rose steals through the transparent skin, and there is a mutinous movement in the red full lips.

"I tell thee, Célie, it is neglectful and intolerable—an orphan, with her own living to earn, to consider herself above her duties. I say to thee, it is thy positive duty to fit each glove across the knuckles, so"—the old lady doubles up her skinny claws by way of illustration—"and from the point of the finger to the thumb tip, so.

I will have it done, I say! dost thou hear?" Madame Bobineau stamps her foot, and her voice rises into that exasperating pitch of shrillness which, to some feminine minds, represents power.

"Bien, madame—I hear you," Célie says. Her heart swells proudly; she would like to put on her bonnet, and seek another employment; but she is an orphan. Her father, Christopher Lalonge, an unsuccessful musician in Rouen, married one of his pupils, for love, against the wish of her parents, and reaped the bitter fruit. When he and his young wife died of the same fever, their one child was left destitute. Through the intervention of the priest who had ministered to them, little Célie was brought up carefully and kindly by some of the good religieuses of Rouen; and, later on, Madame Bobineau, a far-off cousin of the dead musician's, agreed to take the orphan as shopwoman in her business at St. Roque, provided Célie established no expectations on this offer, and found her own lodgings; for Madame Bobineau's house is close to the beautiful church of St. Pierre and the market-place, and her lodgings are sought after and well-paid for. She has now, au premier, an invalid lady, staying at St. Roque for the sake of its famous library; au second, Monsieur le Capitaine Loigereau; au troisième, Monsieur le Vicomte de Foulanges, sous-lieutenant—both attached to the 75th of the line, now quartered in the town; and, au quatrième, in the front room, Monsieur Alphonse Rendu, clerk at the bank of Carmier frères, in the Rue St. Jean: all good customers, who take their meals at the table of Madame Bobineau's gossip and friend, widow Mérand, of the Hôtel Ste. Barbe. In Madame Bobineau's orderly and well-regulated household a young girl cannot be located among so many men, two of them soldiers, so Célie has a lodging in a by-street. There is a private door to the house of Madame Bobineau; if the locataires come into the shop, it must be from the street, and as customers; and it is about one of these very locataires that she is now so angry as to raise a storm of controlled rebellion in Célie Lalonge.

Madame Bobineau gives another stamp with her carpet-shod foot, and retreats to her den, whence, spider-like, she can watch through the semi-curtained glass door.

Célie sits down behind the counter, and leans her head back against the rows of pigeon-holes, so as to get beyond the range of the glass door. There is a far-off seeking look in her grey eyes—a look that easily becomes imploring; it does so now—the red lips part, and the lower one droops.

"What can I do? Madame Bobineau is not kind; I cannot love her; but she might be worse; and if I leave her she will not give me a recommendation, and how is a young girl to find employment without one? Why am I so silly? why is it nothing to me to try on the gloves of others? and yet with him—ah! with him it is quite different. I cannot: my fingers tremble—they all become thumbs. Oh, what is it?"

IV.

Madame Bobineau went to mass at St. Etienne. On her way home she called in on Madame Mérand.

In her calm, quiet way, madame related to her sympathizing gossip her domestic grievances: how the new femme de chambre would spend her time in chatting with the garçon de salle; how the upstairs garçon, Ferdinand, had been lost for three hours yesterday, and was then discovered sound asleep in the bed he was supposed to be making; how a plum-pudding had been served in honour of some English travellers, and how the English had grimaced, and refused to eat it, because of the rum—the "rhom," Madame Mérand affirmed, being the only good point about it. Having related these grievances in her calm, assured voice, Madame Mérand inquired after Madame Bobineau's lodgers.

"Ma foi!" the two little black beads in the peach-stone face of Madame Bobineau twinkle into slyness; "it seems to me you see as much of them as I do: as I went to la messe, Monsieur Rendu was coming out of your parlour. He is highly favoured; but he is a well-mannered, discreet youth. Tenez! only this morning I had a discussion about him with Célie—I have told you of Célie, the orphan of poor Christophe?"

The pupils of Madame Mérand's eyes contract, and then they blaze on the withered old crone with fierce intelligence.

"Célie, your shop-girl? what has happened? what should she know of Monsieur Rendu? Madame Bobineau, your good sense should teach you to keep her out of the way of your lodgers."

Madame Bobineau has outgrown passion, except when she is disobeyed. Moreover, she is unwilling to offend a friend who can give away sometimes a ris de veau, sometimes the remains of a vol-au-vent aux truffes—and Bobineau's old mouth waters at the thought of such dainties—so she answers meekly:

"Yes—yes, Madame Mérand, I am careful; but the girl must serve customers. I have seen Monsieur Rendu come into the shop often lately for gloves, and Célie stands there useless; she lets him choose and try for himself. It is not respectful; it may give him offence, and he may seek another lodging."

Madame Mérand listens, and then she falls off into a reverie. She does not hear what Madame Bobineau is saying about the uncertain habits of the literary lady—au premier, who forgets her dinner, and spends the whole day in the dusty old library of the Musée.

"Madame Bobineau," says the calm voice on a sudden, "that girl is too pretty to serve in a shop. Why don't you marry her?"

"Bon!" the old, brown face is more puckered than before; "who will marry a girl without a dot? And I have none to give her; I am a poor old woman, Madame Mérand, and shall scarcely leave enough behind me to pay for masses for my soul."

The old woman, so hard and callous to her fellows, grows sentimental over her friend's canary bird: it is a "jewel," a "pet;" but the endearing names which Madame Bobineau has at command are not many. She stands peering between the gay gilded wires, and

Madame Mérand sits thinking. She is bending forward; her handsome face rests in the long slender hand; the eyes are so veiled by the sweeping dark lashes, that only an occasional glitter betrays their light.

"Tenez, I will find a husband for Célie," she says, after a while; and there is a hurry in the calm voice—a voice that has a way of snubbing excitement in others by its ordinary repose. "I take charge of this affair. I know of a husband already—your lodger, the Captain Loigereau."

"Monsieur Loigereau!" Bobineau shrieks in her shrillest falsetto; "a full captain—a gentleman! he marry Célie? My friend, you are laughing!"

"I tell you—No! Monsieur Loigereau is a good man; he is humble; he tells me everything; he has risen by his own merits; he can read, but his writing is that of an ignorant person. Well, Monsieur Loigereau is more than forty; he will have completed his full term of military service in October; he has been prudent, and he will then buy a little property in the Auvergnat. He wishes to take a wife, and he has asked me to choose him one: she must be young, and pretty, and amiable. He does not care for money. Your little one will suit him. Are you convinced now?"

"Mon Dieu! He must be a fool!" but Madame Bobineau looked round her cautiously as she said it. "He might find a woman with a nice little sum to add to his. Ah! my friend"—she puts her skinny fingers impressively on the beautiful widow's plump arm—"there is nothing like money. But I leave you to do as you please; I must go home."

They kiss each other on both cheeks; Madame Mérand's glowing skin, like a nectarine in its rich dark tint, seems more even and velvet-like than ever against Bobineau's wrinkles.

"Au revoir," says the younger woman, "I am coming down to the Place presently."

"'Nothing like money'!" she murmurs, while her dark eyes follow Madame Bobineau. "Old imbecile! nothing like love, she means."

At seventeen Madame Mérand had married her first husband, aged seventy, for money, and nothing else, so she was qualified to give her opinion.

V.

Célie goes into the den and says "Good-evening" to her employer.

Madame Bobineau looks at her sharply with those unfringed eyes of hers, and nods her head, then she calls Célie back again in her shrill rasping voice.

The girl turns, but does not come back.

"Come here, child. Why dost thou not tell me of Madame Mérand's goodness to thee?"

A flush steals over the delicate face, and deepens there till Célie is rosy red.

"There is nothing to tell. Madame asked me to go and see her to-morrow evening, but she did not wait for my answer. She went away. I am not going to see her."

"Hein,"—the old wrinkled face falls on one shoulder; this whim of Célie's is incomprehensible. "Thou wilt not go to her? Chut, chut!" madame cries, shrilly; "thou art only a child, or I should be angry. Such an honour may not come again in thy life. Besides, simpleton, thou art not asked alone—thou wilt go with me. I will not listen to refusal; it is arranged; to-morrow at eight we visit Madame Mérand."

Célie turns away; her high spirits rise against this tyranny, and then the natural feelings of youth plead its cause. After all, there is something exhilarating in the idea of this her first soirée at St. Roque. Why should she refuse?

"I know why it is; Madame Mérand is a person I dislike. Why need she fix her great black eyes on me as if she thought I had done something wrong? It seemed as if she did not care for my company. She only wanted to do me a kindness."

She reaches her little room, au cinquième in the back street, close to the Place St. Etienne. She sits down wearily, and throws her cap on the bed.

"I am like a child in the story-book: I cannot get cake, so I will not eat brioche. What would the good sœurs think if they saw me so ungrateful for kindness? I have grown wicked since I left Rouen; he may not be at Madame

Mérand's, and if he is there he will bow to me, and then it will be over."

When afternoon comes next day, Madame Bobineau mounts up to her own bedroom to lay out her cap of real valenciennes lace, with its blue bows, and her black silk gown, and old-fashioned shawl. She is only upstairs half-an-hour; but much may happen in that time.

Célie sits quietly in the shop as usual, but in no quiet mood; she is sewing some lace on to a band to make a frill for her throat to-night, and Monsieur Rendu comes in before she sees him.

"Oh, I hope he will not come to Madame Mérand's to-night," she thinks; but he comes up to the counter and asks for a pair of lavender gloves, and Célie feels there is no hope of his absence. It is strange that this want of hope should make her feel so happy. She does not fit his gloves, but she hands him those he has chosen neatly wrapped in paper.

"Mademoiselle," says Rendu—his quick eyes have detected madame's absence through the open door—"I ——" Here he stops, as embarrassed as the blushing girl behind the counter. "Mademoiselle, I—I will have, if you please, another pair."

He looks so confused, so embarrassed, that Célie smiles. She cannot help it; it is so wonderful to see Monsieur Rendu nervous and blushing like herself.

He sees the smile and grows yet redder; he takes the gloves, pays for them hastily, and leaves the shop with a formal bow to Célie.

"Cold!" the young man says to himself; "she is a thousand times worse: she is sarcastic; she laughs at me—she is heartless! I will buy my gloves somewhere else. I will not be laughed at."

Célie is puzzled at herself.

"He changes so! I was quite feeling glad that he would be at Madame Mérand's, and then when I saw his proud face I was more afraid of him than ever. Why do I think of him at all? I wish I never saw him. It is always him—him—him! I hope he will *not* be there."

VI.

At Madame Mérand's, where the young girl, in her simple white dress, is only stared at by the guests, she feels as if a damp dull mist has fallen on her anticipated enjoyment. There is no one in the room nearly as young as Monsieur Rendu ; there is Monsieur le Petit and his chattering wife, and Monsieur Dupont, who takes snuff every five minutes, or else holds Monsieur Hochard by the button and talks politics, rising to the tips of his boots and sinking his voice to a whisper each time he quotes a dangerous opinion.

These are all; but a little later the door of the large low room is thrown open, and in walks an officer in full uniform. "Monsieur le Capitaine Loigereau," shouts Ferdinand. The Captain is short and stout, with a face like a full moon. He is bald, too, and has little hair besides his moustaches; and as he holds his head very erect, he has the air of a grocer's image in the act of making a summersault backwards.

Célie is surprised, and a little elated, when this gentleman with the epaulettes is presented to her—still more when he converses.

She has not seen him in the shop. Monsieur Loigereau does not affect gloves and perfumes; his idea of happiness is to be in the open air, within sight of green trees and fields, if he can find them.

"Does — mademoiselle — like — trees?" he puffs out each word separately like the snort of a steam-engine.

"Yes, but I have seen so few."

"Mademoiselle—has been—in the Cours Caffarelli?"

"No, monsieur," Célie sighs. She has often longed for an evening walk beside the river; but Madame Bobineau has told her she cannot go there alone. She is surprised when the old woman joins in—

"I will take thee there on Sunday, Célie, after vespers."

Célie wonders why the Captain smiles and looks pleased.

"After all, I have enjoyed myself," says Célie, when she reaches her lodging; "that Captain is a kind old man, and very polite. How good of him to take the old Bobineau home!"

VII.

NEXT morning is market-day. Monsieur Rendu meets Monsieur Loigereau with an enormous bouquet.

"Aha, Monsieur le Capitaine, that is for some fair lady!" and Rendu laughs a little too merrily perhaps at the round Captain, with his crimson trowsers and full-coloured nosegay.

"Monsieur is right," says the Captain, turning scarlet to his ears; "it is indeed for the lady who is to be my wife."

Monsieur Rendu asks pardon, and goes on without even wondering who is the object of the Captain's devotion.

The Captain stumps along on his sturdy little legs to the corner of the Place; he will be late at breakfast, but as a lover he must do his duty.

"Bon jour, mademoiselle!" he goes into the shop and presents the bouquet to Célie, with a grace that could not have been expected from him. Célie is delighted. The Captain is neither confused nor hesitating, good man! He is taking a preliminary step in his wooing; he means to get that over quickly, but he will do it all en règle.

He says a few words to Célie, asks after Madame Bobineau—who peeps at him meanwhile from an ingenious little hole in the curtain—gives a military salute, and departs.

Madame Bobineau enters all agog to know what he has said.

"See," the young girl blushes with delight, "is not this a beautiful nosegay? The Captain Loigereau is a kind, good gentleman."

"Ma foi! I think so." Bobineau frowns a little. "But it is wasteful; a one-franc bouquet would have pleased thee just as well, and he has paid at least three. Put it in water, child; it will die else."

Célie places her precious treasure near her, so that she can take her fill of gazing, and enjoy the exquisite fragrance—the roses are so sweet; she has never had such a nosegay of her own before. Célie is a child yet, spite of her sad, lonely life; and when madame retreats to her web, the girl dances for joy behind the counter.

VIII.

It is that serious moment in the life of a Frenchman, the dinner hour—the five o'clock table d'hôte, at the Hôtel Ste. Barbe; the bell is ringing loudly. In troop the regular town diners, far outnumbering the denizens of the inn itself. Some of these last are English. They come into the room as if they are ashamed of themselves, and take the places the waiter points out, as if they get them by favour; but having accomplished the agony of entrance and placing, they cock their chins up and snuff the air, and give the company to understand, by pitying glances and disparaging remarks made aloud, but supposed only to be heard by their own party, that this is a very different sort of thing indeed to what they are used to. If these observations are made in French, they are safe to be unintelligible to the "natives;" if the Britisher speaks English, he has a way of disguising his language in a hope of thus making himself comprehended. Especially he does this when he asks for "pell-ell."

Monsieur Loigereau looks more like a full moon than ever to-day, he is so beaming. As he goes out from dinner a few significant words pass between him and the widow, in her little room.

"Madame," says the Captain, with effusion, "all goes well, very well. I am a happy man, and you must allow me to thank you for my happiness."

The widow places her slender fingers in his chubby palm, and a solemn "shake hands" is exchanged.

"I congratulate you from my heart," says the widow, as he rolls away.

Her eyes come back from following the Captain and meet the honest blue gaze of Monsieur Rendu. The young man is puzzled. He has only half heard; is the widow then the object of Monsieur Loigereau's adoration? He is not jealous, but he is mystified.

Madame Mérand reads Monsieur Rendu's thoughts as easily as print.

"Is he not good, our Captain? I am so happy in his happiness! I must not tell secrets,"—she puts her head on one side, and steals a long soft glance at Rendu from under her lashes; "and yet I would like to tell you. I think you may be trusted. You know the fortunate little betrothed; and you, perhaps, take an interest in her, as I do. You have seen her." She watches his face, and she draws her breath hard at the eager intelligence that flashes in his eyes.

"Yes, it is the shop-girl of Madame Bobineau—little Célie. Poor little thing! she is so glad and grateful. Monsieur Loigereau was telling me of her delight at a present he made her this morning."

But Rendu is looking at his watch.

"Pardon, madame, I have an appointment this evening."

The widow does not like this haste; but "the sharper the medicine, the sooner the patient is cured," she thinks; but she looks bitter at the certainty she has discovered. "Foolish boy"—her lip curls—"if he once realizes that Célie belongs to some one else, his infatuation will be over."

IX.

Monsieur Rendu hurries along; he feels almost savage joy when he sees the Captain's crimson legs rolling into a café. At any rate, he shall find Célie alone. But he feels stung—sore all over. He knew she was a shop-girl, but it is different to hear her called one by Madame Mérand; shop-girls are not always as guileless as he had imagined Célie to be. This man is old enough to be her father, and she is going to sell herself to him.

Rendu grinds his teeth as he reaches the shop. Yes, there is the bouquet he had seen in the Captain's hand; and as he stands on the doorstep, hesitating, Mimi bends her face over the flowers and seems to kiss them.

But Madame Bobineau is not upstairs to-day; from her peep hole she sees the young man's approach, and comes out into the shop to greet him.

"How is the weather, monsieur?" she asks.

"I am praying for a fine Sunday. I have promised to go for a walk; and you, too, monsieur, you care that it should be fine on Sunday?"

"I?" says Rendu; and then, "oh yes, I am going to Cabourg with Monsieur le Petit."

"Aha!" says Bobineau, slyly, "we know all about that, monsieur; we know who is of the party; we wish you a happy day—don't we, Célie?"

Célie looks up with her innocent wondering eyes at the furiously blushing Alphonse. She wonders a little at madame's unwonted notice.

"Yes," she says simply; "I am sure you will be happy." The poor child has never seen the sea, but she is glad for him to have such a pleasure.

He turns on her in bitter anger:

"I wish you happiness, too, mademoiselle. You love flowers, I see."

"Oh yes; so much—so very much!" His look and words stir her heart strangely; she is frightened, and yet she wishes Madame Bobineau away. If she and Monsieur Rendu could be left alone just one little five minutes she would get courage, and he would be again as kind, as gentle as he used to be.

"He must not be angry with me," thinks the poor child; "if he is not kind again I shall die." By way of hiding her great trouble she hides her face in her roses.

When she raises it Rendu has turned away; he is speaking to some one on the steps.

"Aha, my friend!" says the Captain, "I congratulate you. I hope you and Madame Mérand will have a fine day at Cabourg. Am I not fortunate? Do you not congratulate me?" This is said lower, and ends in a hearty laugh, in the midst of which the Captain advances into the shop.

It seems to Célie as if she and everything else are turning round: Madame Mérand—that proud, beautiful woman!—then all this while Monsieur Rendu has "loved her—her—ah!" sighs the child, "he has been loving her while I thought—oh, what have I not thought?"

The Captain talks to Madame Bobineau: "That will be a fine marriage, will it not? I have for some time had my suspicions; but now it is, I believe, decided—she is very handsome, and he is a worthy young man. Do you consider Madame Mérand handsome, mademoiselle?"

Célie does not know how she answers. Her heart swells and nearly chokes her—she wants to run away. She could push the Captain aside in her despair and rush along the street to her lodging. The Captain requests permission to shake hands with her, and she hears him ask madame, in a grave, formal voice, if he may call on her to-morrow evening.

X.

Célie, Madame Mérand, and Alphonse Rendu sleep little that night. The widow is easy as to Célie; she feels sure that the orphan will be compelled to marry the Captain, but she is uneasy about her lover.

"Chut! I am faint-hearted," she says. "It is my love that makes me distrustful; a man does not yield himself up for love alone, and I have much to offer besides myself;" she winces, and then smiles. "I know I am enough for any man, but if every one looks for something besides the wife in marriage, why should not he? I am too guarded with him — to-morrow — ah, to-morrow! — in that long drive we shall be all in all to each other."

Saturday is a long weary day to Madame Mérand. In the evening comes Monsieur le Petit to say he will be at the door at nine o'clock next morning. It is a grey, misty morning, and as they drive along beside the

Orne, the many-spired city looks phantom-like, looming between the long poplar alleys.

The drive is silent, Monsieur and Madame le Petit in front, Madame Mérand and Monsieur Rendu behind. But after a hearty good breakfast at Monsieur le Petit's cottage at Cabourg, the party stroll on to the sands in a more sociable humour. Monsieur le Petit's cider is potent, and Rendu has drunk freely of it. He is so miserable, so at variance with the whole world, that he feels the need of stimulating his spirits. As he sits by madame on the Plage, he grows more and more interested in her talk; he takes more and more pleasure in looking into those dark deep eyes—soft as velvet beneath his glances; and as he gazes she becomes silent, confused,—her lashes droop, a soft warm blush rises on her cheek. Why at that dangerous moment does a vision of wondering grey eyes, with a yet softer tint rising in a fairer skin, pass between Alphonse and the widow? He cannot tell, and the involuntary question escapes him—

"Are you sure she will marry the Captain Loigereau?"

He does not see the widow; he does not

see her sudden start; he sees only the fair mist-like face out of which shine those pure liquid eyes—it is the contrast between a spring morning and the hot glow of an autumn sunset. He does not see the lightning glance of the jealous woman beside him flashing from the dark eyes, fierce and stormy now; he only shrinks from the stern answer—

"Come with me this evening into the Cours Caffarelli, and I will give you proof."

XI.

"But, madame, I took the bouquet because I love flowers, and because it was so kind of Monsieur Loigereau."

"La, la, la!" shrieks Madame Bobineau; "thou art not a baby, Célie; did any one ever before offer thee a bouquet? but for my bounty thou mightest be sweeping the streets of St. Roque!"

"Ma foi, non!" says Célie; "I could have stayed with the good sisters, and have professed." And then her fresh warm youth kindles, and she shivers at the thought of the whitewashed convent and its peaceful monotony.

This talk is at madame's breakfast-table on Sunday. Yesterday she announced to Célie that Monsieur Loigereau was to be her future husband, and Célie wept and entreated, and was threatened and stormed at. She would not submit; but when Madame Bobineau represented that, as her nearest relative, the law gave her power over her, and that if she proved stubborn she would have her shut up in the Asyle (the Asyle at St. Roque is a refuge for fallen women), the poor child grew terrified at the threat.

So she sits, with a shy downcast face, when in the evening Monsieur Loigereau comes. He stays some time, and congratulates himself that he has advanced his wooing another stage. Célie is very miserable, and with much disgust she lets him kiss her hand when he goes away. Poor desolate child! she has cried all through the night, and now she sits writhing beside Madame Bobineau.

She balances her life while she listens: is it so very happy, that she should shrink from the prospect of a nice little house and garden, with flowers—flowers as plentiful as her heart can desire?

"And life will be worse than ever when *she* is his wife," she sighs.

"It is my fate. Yes, madame," says Célie, desperately; "c'est bien—leave me in peace, and I will marry the Captain."

She endures a rasping of her smooth cheeks by those facsimiles of the peach-stone, and receives much good advice. The day drags along wearily; after vespers they find Monsieur Loigereau in the church porch.

He gives one arm to madame, the other to Célie, and they march off to the Cours Caffarelli—the Captain with a double roll in his walk, for he is very proud of his little victim. The band is playing here, and people are moving up and down, chatting and laughing under the trees. Célie's heart is heavy, or she would enjoy the merry scene: groups of laughing children jumping round their mothers, young girls and their sweethearts whispering in the shade, old people sitting on the benches, watching the lights of the town twinkling in the water—twinkling first like rare glow-worms, or, as Célie thinks, like the first blush of love; then, as darkness grows and lamps multiply, the radiance shoots along the water in rays of living fire, "and the water does not quench it," sighs the poor heart-struck child,—"nothing can quench it till death."

Madame le Petit seizes on her gossip, and Célie walks up and down alone with Monsieur Loigereau. He is more intent on showing off his prize than on talking. Presently they turn, and come face to face with Madame Mérand and Monsieur Rendu. The two elders greet each other warmly; Célie and Rendu are dumb.

"Come, my friend," says Loigereau, "have you not a word of congratulation for me and for mademoiselle?"

Rendu bows, and then he passes on. Monsieur Loigereau is hailed by two comrades; he turns to look at Célie, but she is gone.

"She does not like being stared at, the little dove," says the good Captain; "but she should not run away—it is not convenable."

XII.

MEANTIME, Alphonse Rendu walks up and down with the widow in moody, determined silence, till she expresses a wish to go home.

"Adieu! monsieur," she says when they reach the inn. "I am sadly unfortunate. I thought to give you a day's pleasure, and I have given you pain. Forgive me! I tried to make you happy." Her shining eyes are full of tears; she holds out her ungloved hand.

Rendu is moved. Here is a woman, beautiful and rich, laying her heart at his feet, and he neglects her for the thought of one who has never shown him any kindness, who openly prefers the Captain Loigereau.

"Madame, forgive me! I will try and deserve your goodness." He prints a warm kiss on the slender hand, but he is gone before the widow can answer.

He goes on, heavy-hearted, to the Place St. Etienne. It is late; the Place is in utter solitude. He is too full of tumult and anxious thought to light a cigar. The moon is fuller still than on that first night we saw Monsieur Rendu; but she is hidden behind a mass of dark clouds.

The young man paces up and down—up and down; but his tumult does not calm. Presently the clouds drift, and the pure, bright moon shines down. Monsieur Rendu finds no comfort in her light; he wishes the clouds would come back; he found a refuge in the darkness.

Surely he hears a sob! But the Place is empty; no one could hide from the broad moonlight. Suddenly Rendu remembers the double row of limes, forming a bocage all along the Place. He walks quickly into it; the sobs grow more distinct. But it is so dark that at first he does not make out a figure crouched on a bench, some way down the bocage.

CONCLUSION.

CÉLIE does not return, and Monsieur Loigereau grows anxious, and he is not satisfied by Madame Bobineau's assurance that Célie has gone home tired. He resolves to go to her lodging and ascertain her safety.

"No; Mademoiselle Lalonge has not been home since the morning," says the little girl who opens the door to him.

Loigereau's face flushes scarlet; but he has not taken twenty of his rolling steps from the house when he meets Célie herself, arm-in-arm with Monsieur Alphonse.

The Captain grows redder still, and begins some very angry words. He is not allowed to finish. Rendu grasps one hand, and Célie clasps the other between her little soft fingers.

"Monsieur!" Rendu's voice trembles with feeling; "forgive us,—we beg your pardon, you have been hardly used. I have been a blind fool, and——"

"And I, monsieur," says the trembling girl's voice, "I am much worse, for I only said I would marry you because madame vowed to send me to the Asyle——"

The Captain stares and puffs out a few words of astonishment, but in the end he behaves like a wise man. He forgives the young couple, heartily; bids them go home, and promises to make peace with the Bobineau and with Madame Mérand.

The first achievement was not very difficult; and the good Captain did not quit Madame Bobineau until she had named a day for the marriage of the young couple; but when he told his news to Madame Mérand and saw the widow's flashing eyes and quivering nostrils, Loigereau grew indignant.

"Madame, I have given up my hopes; why should you be less generous? Monsieur Rendu is not actually your fiancé. Would you retain a man who loves another?"

He draws closer, and looks seriously in the angry face.

"Chattering, meddling fool!" says the widow, "take that;" and she gives him a box on the ear, which sounds even out in the street.

The Captain puts one hand to his face and the other on his sword, his small eyes blaze, and then he smiles:

"Ma foi! madame, I thank you. I am consoled; if a calm woman of thirty can so imitate a tiger-cat, what might not my little untrained shop-girl have done? I have the honour, madame, to wish you adieu!"

VICTOIRE'S FAITH.

VICTOIRE'S FAITH.

IN TWO CHAPTERS.

I.

"Ah ça, Madame Carmier, but it is hard that you must send one tall son after another to fight those accursed Prussians!"

Madame le Petit, the wife of the best hairdresser in St. Roque, is so much shorter than her friend that she balances her round, squat figure on her heels and peers with her small, black, bead-like eyes into the calm face so far above her own.

Marie Carmier does not answer. She sighs; but she sighed five minutes ago, when the last soldier turned his back on St. Roque, and tramped on along the broad road that runs westward.

She has not stirred a finger since the soldiers marched away. Her straight, stiff figure, in its black jacket and skirt, stands erect; one arm hangs by her side, but her right hand is fixed just below the frill atop of her cap, shading her eyes while she gazes after the soldiers.

She can no longer make them out. A cloud of white dust has risen behind them, and this is gradually dispersing itself over the suburb of Vaucelles.

Madame le Petit, not being of a patient nature, has looked around in search of amusement, but her companion does not notice this distraction. As the dust clears finally and reveals the entire disappearance of the soldiers, Marie takes her hand from her forehead, and turns to her companion.

"It is hard for me, Madame le Petit; but what will you? It is the fortune of others besides, and it is worse for the poor girl Victoire than for me. I have ten years—at most fifteen—of life before me. But she is only nineteen. Poor little one! I must go home and comfort her."

Madame le Petit snaps her fingers.

"I would not give that for Victoire's sorrow. The heavier the shower, my friend, the sooner it is ended."

But Marie Carmier is anxious to be free from her gossiping companion. She turns away.

"Bon jour, Madame le Petit," and her long striding steps soon put distance between her and the hair-dresser's chattering wife.

Marie Carmier lives a little way out of St. Roque, on the road to La Maladrérie. Her house is small and whitewashed, with a black door and window-sills, and a slated roof. In the midst of this appears a sharp-peaked dormer window, and over the front of the house climbs a vine, the stem of which is carefully nailed up in a sort of wooden trough set on end. At the angle of the house, niched in the wall, is a plaster image of La Sainte Vierge.

Marie opens the door, which leads at once into a small room. The floor is tiled and carpetless; but there is a look of comfort in the bed with scarlet-and-white hangings and coverlet, in the well-kept walnut-wood armoire in the corner, and in the shining brass pans on the white wall. There is an easy-chair, too, with a cushioned seat of rich-coloured chintz. This chair is drawn close to the round table, and, resting her arms upon it, a young girl sits in the chair, sobbing convulsively.

Madame Carmier closes the door and goes softly up to Victoire.

"My child"—she lays her strong bony hand on the fair shining head—"it is over. Now we must try and comfort one another."

Marie's lips quiver as if she too longs to pour forth her grief in passionate sobs; but she keeps it down by a strong effort.

Victoire's shoulders shake as if her slender body were being wrenched asunder.

"Ah! no, no. There is no comfort left for me—none—none. I cannot take it. Oh Louis, Louis! Why didst thou go away? I shall die without thee!"

Marie only sighs. "Poor child! It is worse for her than for me. It is her first sorrow."

And at the remembrance of the five sons who have one by one been taken from her, Marie Carmier sighs again.

All but Louis are dead now, and lying among scarcely-covered heaps of brave men, or perhaps on one of those fearful battle-fields where the slain lay yet unburied.

The poor mother sat down and crossed her hands in her lap. Victoire was still sobbing. The clock in the corner seemed to keep up a monotonous accompaniment. Presently she said—

"This will never do, my child. Come and help me to get supper."

Marie rose up and set the pot-au-feu on the hot hearth—for the fireplace was an open one.

Victoire rose too, but her eyes were blinded with tears. She did little to help the older woman.

"Bathe thy face, my child," said Marie; "the cool water will refresh thee."

Victoire bathed her red eyes and smoothed her bright hair, and you saw how pretty she was. She had a fair skin, with a soft peach-like bloom melting into it; sweet blue eyes, and a little nose and mouth which might have belonged to a child, they were so vague in expression. There was a touching sadness in her young face as she sat opposite the old woman, which made Marie's heart warm to her.

"Thou wilt come to me wholly now, my Victoire. If Louis had married thee at the Saint Michel, thou wouldest have been here of right.

I hold thee as my daughter quite as much as if the blessing had been said over thee."

Victoire went and put her arms round Madame Carmier's neck.

"Thou art my mother," she said, and then she broke down again with a piteous cry—"Oh, Louis, Louis! come back to me, or I shall die!"

It is a month to-day since the last levy marched away from Vaucelles, and no news has come from Louis Carmier.

Rumours of battles reach St. Roque—desperate battles—and it begins to be whispered, out of the hearing of Monsieur le Préfet and his officials, that the French losses are more than the Prussian, and these whispers have reached Marie Carmier.

Her face is very grave as she bends over the black tulle veil she embroiders. Marie's face is usually grave, but there is a look of troubled sadness this morning which is foreign to it—a look which was not there till the post brought her a letter.

A letter from Victoire. The girl has been dull and distraite, and last Sunday she told

Madame Carmier that she thought a few days' change with her cousin, Madame Lesage, would do her some good.

Victoire is an orphan. Till Louis asked his mother to take her in, the girl had no home but at the milliner's for whom she worked. Madame Lesage took no notice of her pretty young cousin in those days; but then a rich widow with an only son is naturally shy of penniless girls.

Victoire was to return to-day, and instead of coming she has sent this letter.

Marie finishes her veil, folds it, and lays it aside. Then she fumbles in her deep pocket for the letter, and reads it again.

"Bah! bah! for shame, Marie Carmier. It is I who am suspicious and fanciful. Why should not the child like to stay at the farm instead of living with me? Ma foi! it is something to have a cousin who has a house in St. Roque and a farm also at Dives. It is true I miss Victoire, but I am selfish to wish it otherwise."

But though she says this bravely to herself, Marie cannot shake off the gloom that Victoire's letter has brought to her.

"Allons!" she says after a while, "it is market-day, and I will go and bargain with Jeanneton for a new pitcher."

Market is nearly over. Old Elodie, the flower-seller, is cramming her unsold pots of basil, myrtles, and fuchsias into her donkey-cart. The fruit and vegetable stalls are already stripped, and only some yellow cabbage-leaves, and pea-shucks, and slices of melon-rind, and a general faint fruity perfume indicate the rich display that has been glowing under the red and green umbrellas of the Place St. Pierre. The umbrellas have departed with their owners. The awnings will soon be taken from the booths, and then the tall, graceful flèche overhead will look down again on the knobbed pavement of the Place till market-day comes round once more in St. Roque.

But the crockery still lies baking on the stones, and Marie Carmier bends over this. She is balancing the merits of a red pitcher against a brown one. A quick pleasant voice suddenly makes her look up.

"Tiens! and it is you, Madame Carmier."

It is Monsieur le Petit himself, the hairdresser of St. Roque, a very important functionary, who shaves Monsieur le Préfet, and goes every day to the Hôtel Ste. Barbe to coiffer stately, dark-eyed Madame Mérand, the proprietress thereof. Monsieur is a small, jovial man, with a temper as easy as his tongue, and that goes as if he oiled it daily.

"Have you any news from the army?" he asks.

Monsieur le Petit never forgets the small courtesies of life. It is essential to his calling to know everything that relates to everybody else; and besides, he is very kind-hearted to all women. "I have no chance against them," he says, flourishing his small fat hands; "I am their victim." The word "victim" is jealously translated by Madame le Petit. She considers her husband the most outrageous flirt in the town of St. Roque. It is whispered in the said town that Monsieur le Petit does not escape scot-free, and that he occasionally gets his hair pulled out of its artistic group of curls. But at this moment he stands freshly frizzled and radiant beside Madame

Carmier, and puts his head tenderly on one side as he asks the question.

Marie sets down the red pitcher, and shakes her head.

"Bien, no news is good news," says monsieur, cheerfully. "Louis has been a lucky fellow all his life, and this will run to the end. And how then is Mam'selle Victoire?"

A cloud comes over the face of Madame Carmier—she stoops over the pitcher.

"Tiens, I will have the red one," she says to the seller, a woman with a pink kerchief drawn over her face, the face being as brown as her pitchers are.

The brown-faced woman nods, and holds out a wrinkled hand.

"I have not seen Victoire since Sunday." Marie Carmier is paying her money, and she does not look at Monsieur le Petit as she says this; but the hair-dresser is already aware that there is something amiss.

"I am going your way," he says cheerfully —nothing is so pleasant to Monsieur le Petit as a fresh bit of gossip—"I have business near St. Etienne."

"Bien," says Madame Carmier; but she does not look content. She prefers to bear her own burden silently; she has no notion of lightening it by complaint.

The pair walk silently out of the Place St. Pierre, past the quaint stone-gabled banking house, to the corner of the Rue Notre Dame. Monsieur le Petit's shop is just beyond this corner, and he quickens his pace as he passes by, lest madame should perceive that he is accompanied, and should come forward and claim his attention.

"I thought"—the shop, with its coils of hair and bottles of perfume, is safely passed, and Monsieur le Petit is himself again—"I thought," he repeats, "that Mam'selle Victoire was to live with you always. Is it not so, madame?"

Marie's lips are pressed impatiently together, but the hair-dresser looks inquiringly in her face—he will have an answer.

"It was so arranged; but what will you, monsieur? Young girls have their fancies, and it is Victoire's fancy now to go and live with her cousin, the widow Lesage."

"Ma foi! the widow Lesage—the widow Lesage, do you say?"—Monsieur le Petit's eyebrows are raised, and he repeats each syllable distinctly, as if trying to discover the secret of Victoire's behaviour—"has the cousin Lesage a family?"

"She has one son, Georges, who manages the farm."

Marie Carmier tries to look indifferent, but it is hard to do this under the sharp scrutiny of Monsieur le Petit's eyes.

"Georges—Georges Lesage. Hé, ma foi! but I know him; Georges Lesage is of my friends, and he is a well-made, well-mannered youth."

"Bon jour, my friend," Marie Carmier says abruptly, although they have not nearly reached St. Etienne. Monsieur le Petit has stopped as they passed a doorway just beyond the Hôtel Ste. Barbe, a doorway in which is a grating, and through this appears an old-fashioned house with a little parterre in front, gay with crimson and blue and yellow flowers; in the middle of the walk which leads from the grated door to the verandah of the house is a tiny fountain, sparkling and rainbow-hued, with gold-fish playing merrily in the basin beneath. China roses climb up the verandahposts, and scent the air with their exquisite blushing flowers. Monsieur is looking so intently through the grating that he starts at madame's farewell.

"Why such haste?" he says, but Marie nods and passes on. Her heart is very, very sore, and Monsieur le Petit's words are like a blister. She has tried not to doubt Victoire, and yet why should Monsieur le Petit speak of Georges?

"But it is wrong to doubt," she says; "I get old and fractious, and it is true that which Victoire says—I take life too seriously. If only I could carry care as lightly as Monsieur le Petit does! Yes, yes, it is natural she should like a little change; the child has found me dull. Julie Lesage has never known trouble, and she can live in the town or near the sea as she pleases; and Georges is young and gay, and he is the cousin of Victoire; it is but natural she should cling to her own flesh and blood. Yes, yes, it is right—when Louis comes back, Victoire will be glad enough to return to me."

It could not occur to Marie Carmier that Victoire was ungrateful, because in receiving her she had only reckoned on the delight of having a daughter, a companion who loved Louis, and would never tire of listening to his praises. She had not said to herself, "I am giving the orphan a home." If Victoire had grown dull and distraite, Marie decided that it was her grave face and her own reserved ways that made the atmosphere of her cottage depressing.

"It will be all right when Louis comes back," she repeats, and by the time she reaches St. Etienne the brave old face has forced a cheerful smile to its lips.

When she gets home the sunshine streams in through the window, and the new red pitcher glows like a gem.

Marie's heart is lightened of its doubts and dim fears.

"I will not stay in-doors," she says; "I will go and take my work to the fabrique, and get another piece."

"Le mieux est l'ennemi du bien." Marie's first expedition has cheered and quieted her—why is she not content to leave well alone?

The Fabrique de Dentelles, for which Marie Carmier embroiders—a fabrique which furnishes employment to many of the women of St. Roque—is up near the Church of St. Julien.

Marie has reached the Place round the church, and then she gives a little start.

There is a triangular bit of grass, bordered by old Spanish chestnuts, and standing under the shade of these trees is Victoire Lesage.

And Victoire is no longer pale and sad; her head is bent, and her eyes are downcast, but she looks prettier than ever as she listens blushing to a tall man beside her.

Madame Carmier cannot see his face, but she guesses that it is the cousin Georges.

The old woman's heart sinks like lead, and then an angry flush rises on her cheeks. She crosses the white stony road, and joins the pair beneath the chestnut-trees.

"Ma foi! is it thou, Victoire? I thought thou wert at Dives."

II.

VICTOIRE starts and colours violently. Her companion turns round, and shows a fresh, foolish face, with chestnut-coloured hair and eyes—sly, fox's eyes, Marie thinks. Victoire looks up with her sweet, timid smile; she is so pretty and winning, as she puts one small hand on the old woman's long gaunt arm, and holds up her soft face to be kissed.

Marie kisses her roughly, but she is appeased. It is difficult to keep cross when you are looking at Victoire Lesage.

"The cousin Julie came in to market," Victoire says, "and she has now gone to the house of Monsieur le Curé, to carry some eggs to his ménagère; we are waiting with the charrette for her"—she looks towards a country cart standing near the church.

The young man takes off his hat to Madame Carmier.

"Can we take madame on her way, or be

of any service to her?" he says, in a well-to-do, patronizing voice.

Marie shakes her head; she is watching Victoire.

"My child"—she speaks softly—"thou shouldst have come to see me. Am I not thy mother?"

"Yes, yes—oh yes!"

The little trembling mouth is held up again, and it seems to Marie Carmier that the girl clings to her.

"Come home with me," whispers the old woman; "it is better, safer, my child."

Victoire hesitates.

"Tenez"—Georges has moved a few steps away, he turns round on them now as he speaks—"here is my mother, and we have no time to lose."

The door of the small grey house beside the church has opened, and from it comes a short puffy woman, in a black silk gown; she wears a grey shawl, and a bonnet. Madame Lesage feels herself a great lady, when she comes in to make purchases for the farm, although she has only a charrette for equipage.

Marie Carmier shrinks into herself as the rustling dame comes nearer. Her poverty makes her shy, for she was not poor always, and she could remember, if she cared to do so, that Julie Dutemps used to run about bareheaded when she was a child, with common wooden sabots on her feet.

"Bon jour, madame," says the florid widow in a fat voice, full of pity and self-satisfaction. "I have taken this little girl off your hands, you see;" then in a whisper to the grave, stiff woman, "it is my son's wish, and what will you? Our sons rule us whether we like it or not."

Marie could not bear it. She felt herself the guardian of Louis' happiness. Did this proud woman think he could be robbed of Victoire? She turned her back on Madame Lesage.

"Victoire"—she grasped the girl's arm so tightly that she flinched—"come home with me for Louis' sake."

Victoire drew her arm away. She looked vexed; there were tears in her sweet blue eyes.

"Ma mère, why dost thou doubt me?" she pleaded, but there was a fretful tone in her voice. "I will come back to thee. Did I not say in my letter, I wished but to stay at Dives till cold weather came? Thou wouldest not have me break a promise, and I have promised Julie to stay till then."

Marie's eyes are stern as she answers—

"Thou art right in that, my child, *never break a promise;* remember, I trust thee, Victoire."

The girl looks down sorrowfully.

"How hard and cold she is!" Aloud she says, "Yes, yes, my mother. Bon jour—au revoir."

And then while Madame Lesage accomplishes an elaborate courtsey, Georges helps Victoire into the cart, and Marie has no excuse to delay her journey to the fabrique.

She hears the cart jolting down the steep hilly street into the town again, but Marie will not look round.

"Sainte Vierge! it is always so with me; when I feel most, and there is most need to be gentle and tender, I am hard and cold; but no, if Victoire's love for Louis is only to be kept by management, it is not worth the keeping."

The weather is growing cold, but it does not find Victoire in Marie's cottage. Marie is not there herself. She has been sent for to see her son. Louis has been severely wounded in the late battle; but he is sensible when his mother reaches him.

"You must not talk to him, my good woman, and above all you must not make him speak." This was the doctor's charge when he gave Marie to the Sœur who was to take her to her son.

Marie sits alone beside him now in the clean, bare, whitewashed military hospital. Louis has fallen into a stupor from exhaustion, and the Sister thinks he may be left with his mother this evening, she seems so quiet and self-restrained. There is no one to watch the poor worn woman, the patients in three other beds are too ill to notice what passes near them, and Marie cries quietly as she sits close by her darling. There is not much relief; she dares not sob; only tears well out silently from the sad eyes, and roll over the hard colourless face.

"He is my fifth and my last," she thinks; "but God is merciful to let me watch over this one to the end; and if he could live it would be much, oh, so much to me!"

She clasps her hands fervently and rocks herself to and fro. The doctor's words come back in all their quiet decision—

"Your son may live, but it is hard to believe it. I cannot advise you to hope it, and he may sink speedily."

She gives a long yearning look at the suffering face with closed eyelids lying there so near, yet so unconscious.

"He knew me"—a proud, fond look lights up her poor face for a moment—"and he looked so glad his mother had come to nurse him; but then he looked round, and that was for Victoire. I whispered to him that she was well, and that she grieved for him. For she wrote to me that she grieved. But my Louis shall know no more."

The sick man makes a restless movement and opens his eyes.

"Victoire," he murmurs.

Marie bends over him.

"Victoire is well and she grieves for thee."

She smiles so brightly, so happily, that he is satisfied. His eyes close again, and again he sinks into the same dull stupor.

The Sœur comes in and examines her patient. Then she beckons Marie away.

"You must come and lie down now, ma bonne mère," the calm, sweet-faced woman says. "Do you know you have been of service to our patient? He is better than when I went away."

When Marie opens her eyes she is surprised to find how long she has been asleep. Daylight is coming in through the narrow window, and at first she cannot remember where she is.

It all comes back soon enough: the Sister's comforting words as she bade her seek rest, and then the being led by the guide to whom she was confided to the small cottage near the hospital, where she has passed the night.

As she goes out from the dirty little room into the road, she meets the doctor. He nods at her and smiles.

"You may go to your patient," he says; "you did wonders for him yesterday."

Marie goes on with a lighter heart, and yet she feels timid and ill-assured. How can she continue to deceive Louis when he grows well enough to ask questions?

She finds him propped up by pillows, very pale and weak, but with a light and an expression on his worn face that she had not thought to see on it again. He is eager to speak, but the Sister holds up a warning hand.

"I cannot have any words, my friend. You may look at your mother, and she may look at you; but if you begin to talk we shall never get you strong enough to go back with her to St. Roque."

Back to St. Roque! Marie feels as if she could hug the placid-faced woman; but she sits quiet till the doctor comes in with another of the nurses. Then she slips away to the far end of the room, where the Sister is attending a patient.

"Ma sœur," says Marie, as soon as she can be listened to, "I am in trouble. Will you tell me what to do?"

The Sister is short and stout. It is almost piteous to see tall, grave Marie Carmier standing in a supplicating attitude before her, as she relates her difficulty and the grief which she is keeping from her son. The Sister nods her head approvingly.

"He must not know it yet," she says; "but do not trouble yourself, my good mother. You shall not be left alone with him. Wait, and the good God will show you when the story must be told."

Once more there is a bright fire in the cottage near La Maladrérie, and as Marie Carmier bustles about and sees to her son's comforts, she looks happier than she has looked since he went away.

He is weak still, and walks with a stick; but he has not lost a limb, and the doctor has promised him that with care he will in time recover his health. But Marie's great comfort lies in the fact that she has told her secret, and that to all outward seeming Louis has taken it less to heart than she expected.

It was on the journey home that she at last found her opportunity. Louis turned very white, but he asked no questions, and Victoire's name has not once passed his lips.

It is the second day since his return. He has been strangely silent since his recovery. This morning he has been more silent than ever.

"Mother," he says abruptly, "can I do

anything for thee? I am going down to St. Roque."

Marie glances at him, and she checks an exclamation of surprise. Louis stands grasping his stick with a stern, determined look in his face.

"Thou wilt not go alone?" she says; "let me call Jacques Serret. He will be proud to lend thee his arm to lean on."

Louis shakes his head.

"I shall not get beyond St. Pierre, and I am strong enough to walk that far alone."

But by the time he reaches St. Etienne there comes to him a sudden distaste to face the bustle of the Rue Notre Dame. He turns aside, down into the Place, and walks under one of the leafless lime alleys, up and down, striking his stick more and more angrily on the stony path. He is thinking of Victoire. He has not asked his mother if she is yet married to the young farmer, but he is impatient to know the truth. To-day is market-day in St. Roque, and when he started it was with the fixed idea of questioning some of his numerous acquaintances among the market people who are likely to come in from

Dives. And then his heart had failed him. He could not subject himself to the pity, however friendly, of others. And who would be likely to blame Victoire for preferring a well-to-do farmer to a wounded soldier?

He gets tired of these thoughts, and turns suddenly out of the allée. He looks across the Place. A stout woman and a young girl are standing at the farther end of it. The woman goes on and leaves the girl alone.

A sudden impulse seizes Louis. He feels sure that the girl is Victoire. In another moment he sees that she is coming towards him. But the end of the Rue de la Paix lies between them, and it is possible that she may turn down this, and he may lose all chance of finding her alone.

He hurries on so fast that the girl perceives his approach. At first she does not recognize him, he is so pale, so changed; but before he has quite reached her she starts violently and the colour flames over her face. She stops, and looks as if she were going to run away. Louis hurries on.

"I am glad to see you," he says, coldly. "You can answer a question I am unwilling to put to any one but yourself. Are you married?"

Victoire's look of distress is pitiful. She hides her face in her hands and shrinks away from her questioner; but Louis is resolved that she shall answer.

"Are you married?" he repeats.

"No," in a beseeching voice.

He puts his hand gently on her arm; as he looks at her his face softens into an exquisite tenderness.

"Art thou then indeed free, my bien-aimée?"

Victoire draws her arm away with a shuddering sigh, then she takes her hands from her face, and gives a quick, frightened glance round the Place.

"No, no, Louis"—she does not look at him—"I am not free, and you must not so speak. I am betrothed to Georges Lesage, and—and—I am to marry him in three days." And then she bursts out crying, and covers up her face again.

He shrinks as if he had received a blow; then, after a pause, "Victoire, I cannot understand," he says; "and I have a right to an explanation from thee. But we cannot talk here; come under the allée and tell me what thou meanest."

She gives a timid look at him, and his determined face governs her against her will; she walks beside him till they are half-way down the allée, then Louis stops and takes both her hands in his.

"Poor little darling! Why dost thou tremble?" he says, so tenderly that Victoire looks up with less fear in her sweet troubled face. "Victoire, thou hast been persuaded against thy will. I believe thou lovest me. See, I am not angry; I love thee more than my life. Come home with me to my mother, and give up this Georges Lesage."

Till his last words, Victoire has hesitated; a soft, tender thrill of happiness has vibrated through her, and drawn her involuntarily closer to Louis; he clasps both her hands yet more closely in one of his, and puts his arm round her.

Either the movement or Georges' name rouses her; she breaks away from him in sudden terror.

"Oh, Louis! go away. If I were to be seen with you they would never forgive, and it is easy to make Georges jealous, and oh, I must marry Georges——"

"Thou must not, thou canst not; Victoire, thou lovest me."

But she draws her hands away with a passion of tears.

"No; I do not love thee," she says angrily, "I do not, but I cry because I am a child. Listen, and I will show you why I cannot marry you. I had been poor always till I went to Dives, and I thought there was no greater happiness than being a poor man's wife. But I know better now, Louis. I know that I care for clothes, and pleasure, and amusement, and my life at Dives much more than for love, much more than I ever cared for you. And, Louis, if I had married you I should have made you miserable."

While she speaks, the ardent glow has faded from his face; he does not try to take her hand again; he does not even look at her.

"Say it again, ingrate," he says at last, in a harsh voice—"no, I do not want to wrong thee, Victoire; it is true then that thou art bad enough to marry a husband without loving him, so long as he can give thee fine clothes and pleasure."

His stern, altered voice irritates her; she is in terror lest Madame Lesage should find her with Louis; she looks at him angrily.

"Yes, it is my nature. I do love dress and pleasure, and we must all be as we are made; and Julie says I shall soon love Georges when he is my husband; she says the love that comes after marriage is the best, and she must know."

She turns at his sudden movement. Marie Carmier stands close beside her son, with a heavy frown on her face.

"If love comes at all, Victoire—remember, if it comes at all, unworthy girl that thou art——"

But Victoire has no mind to encounter her reproaches; she darts away at full speed, and is soon out of sight.

Louis takes his mother's arm, and presses it fondly.

"It is over, my mother," he says, "and it is best as it is. I would not have believed it from any one but herself."

MADAME GERDER'S HUSBAND.

MADAME GERDER'S HUSBAND.

(COMMUNICATED BY THE BROTHER OF JEMIMA.)

I.

"AND I say to you, monsieur, that I would not ask you to derange yourself for my convenience. Ah, ma foi! I think not, indeed, except that in this change you will find a benefit. Ciel!"

Here Madame Mérand's black eyes seek the sky—for we are standing at the entrance of the open courtyard round which the hotel is built—and her well-shaped hands clasp each other lovingly, as if for support against my mute injustice. I had not spoken. At home, in England, a person, nameless here, calls me contradictory; but I am a shy man, and moreover my French, although passable, is still insular French, and if one contradicts, one should not be either undecided or absurd, especially face to face with Madame Mérand. She has been very handsome, and she still has a well-preserved figure and bright black eyes, but the brightness is hard. Between ourselves, I am afraid of my landlady. I would not change places with that small light-haired husband of hers on any account. His name is Dupont, and she writes herself, I believe, Dupont-Mérand; but every one calls her Madame Mérand.

As I look at those black eyes coming down from the sky to settle piercingly on my quiet countenance, I again congratulate myself that I am not the light-haired Dupont. It is all very well to have a rich, clever, fine-looking wife, and so only to have a nominal post at the harbour of St. Roque, to smoke cigarettes or play billiards all day; but I fancy Monsieur Dupont feels like a truant schoolboy when he comes home in the evening, and goes into the little parlour on the left-hand side of the arched entrance-way, and sees us free men at dinner in the salle à manger opposite. But then there are men to whom work is the greatest evil of life, and it is possible that Monsieur Dupont takes his snubbings as the daily wage of his inglorious idleness.

"Ciel!" Madame has taken a long breath,

and now she repeats her adjuration with emphasis. "I say to monsieur that the room I propose is a charming bedchamber—large, spacious, with two windows, with two beds—enfin, with a carpet of Brussels and a large round table. What will you? It has, besides, a glass door, which looks on the gallery running round the court."

She points upward, and I see the door in question at the end of the open gallery, shaded by a white muslin curtain.

When one has kept one's repugnance under control it is mortifying to be argued with as if one had expressed it. I know that madame was talking to the look she surprised on my face, not to me—a look which I expect spoke plainly.

"Why should I be moved out of my comfortable bedroom just because a general of division is to take up his quarters in the Hôtel Ste. Barbe for two nights?" But I made no remonstrance in words.

Madame moves past me to the foot of the staircase, and my tongue recovers itself as soon as her back is turned and I no longer see those flashing black eyes.

"It is all very well, madame, but the room to which you point is a back room, and I object to windows which have only a back look-out."

Stables, foul smells, horrors not to be named, flit through my brain as I follow those firmly set, shapely feet upstairs. She makes no answer till we reach the end of this right-hand gallery, and then she unlocks the curtained door, and flings it open.

"Voilà, monsieur! Perhaps monsieur will have the complaisance to enter and tell me if any front windows in St. Roque can be more delightful than these?"

Two long windows. Madame pushes the persiennes wide open.

The sunshine streams in — morning sunshine — bringing with it an exquisite flower fragrance.

Involuntarily I walk quickly up to a window. I don't mind confessing that I have passion for flowers. They are to me that which dumb animals are to some people — creatures to be loved and cherished. There is something so delicate, so unearthly, in their beauty, that I sometimes fancy they come direct from heaven—hints of the joys in store for the blessed.

I have a satisfaction in writing this thought down here, because, as this paper will be printed anonymously, no one can trace it to me; and I would not have Jemima (my sister's name is not Jemima, but it is shorter than saying a "nameless person" every time, and answers the purpose as well,)—I would not have her aware of this sentimental belief of mine on any account. One must never allow a woman to perceive that one has any power of fancy. She immediately begins to doubt one's common sense, and stigmatizes one as womanish and unable to direct her in the ordinary affairs of life; and with all that has been written and said about women, first and last—and nine-tenths of it is sheer nonsense—the only point I agree with is that, however much kindness and affection you have for a woman, you must always show her that you are her superior. *Show* it practically—don't assert it, my good fellow, whoever you may be, or she will laugh at you directly. I am not sure that Madame Mérand would ever have eyes to see any man's superiority. And this reflection brings me again to the back windows of the Hotel Ste. Barbe.

Facing me at a distance of ten yards or so are other back windows, plainly belonging to small houses, and on the leads which stretch beside the little court of one of these, exactly opposite, is a perfect blaze of flowers; snowy fuchsias with glowing centres, geraniums, myrtles full of starry blossoms, nasturtiums of many colours, and, among all, plenty of scented verbenas and heliotrope.

"Madame, you are right," I exclaim. "I am quite satisfied. You may order my luggage sent round."

Madame grows radiant; the black eyes soften, and she courtseys, and is even voluble for so stately a person.

"Monsieur admires flowers?" Really women have a way of seeing into my thoughts which is startling, for when I look at myself in the glass I cannot say I behold an expressive countenance.

"Ah!"—madame gives a sigh here—"they are the only comfort of my poor neighbour there, Madame Gerder." She looks across at the opposite window; it is open, and shows a small almost empty room. There seems only a curtained bed, a table, two chairs, an armoire, and a white-and-black crucifix beside the bed. "A dull-looking room," and my eyes go up to the story above, which plainly belongs to a laundress. Two poles project from this window, laden with many-coloured garments drying in the sunshine. In the court below an urchin sits on the stones playing with a headless doll, and from these stones a vine struggles up the wall of the house and clusters its leaves round Madame Gerder's window.

"Too bright a frame for so dull a picture." I turn to make inquiry about my opposite neighbour, but Madame Mérand has departed.

II.

I LOOKED round my room. The beds appeared clean and comfortable. Are not beds in good French inns always clean and comfortable? I have found them so. There was none of the velvet and gilded splendour which had adorned the chimney-piece of my former bed-chamber; but then, what will you? as madame would have said. The sofa was larger, softer even, and the room itself was twice as large as the one I had given up to the general, and, instead of the perpetual noise and traffic of the Rue Ecuyère, I had a quiet look-out on those lovely flowers. I felt glad that I had yielded without much remonstrance.

"I wish I knew why she is 'poor Madame Gerder.'" I was looking at the flowers again.

"Madame Leroux! Madame Leroux!" in the shrillest tone from an unseen inmate over the way. "Are you come in?"

My interest in my flower-loving neighbour had received a check. I object to loud-voiced women, and this was no doubt Madame Gerder. I took up my hat again, and went out for a walk to the old ruined castle.

No peace here. A set of boys, small, noisy, ragged creatures, were collected round one of their number declared to-be a Prussian spy, and they grew so eager and excited in their game that they were just proceeding to hang him to a branch of one of the trees in the castle moat when the sentry above called to them to desist.

I walked slowly through the town, musing over the miseries of war. There was scarcely an able-bodied man to be seen in the streets or shops.

"I wonder what the next generation of Frenchwomen will do for husbands!"

I had to dine with a friend near the harbour; he was to start for Havre early next morning, so I stayed with him as long as I could.

Madame Mérand was sitting in her little parlour as I passed under the low-browed entrance; she came forward, and herself presented me with the key of my new room—a most unusual condescension. I had easily gained her favour; but I remark that a little [illegible] with the [illegible]

"Monsieur will find his bougie on his table."

While I groped my way carefully across my yet unknown chamber, I saw a light opposite, probably in the window of Madame Gerder. I confess that I am slightly inquisitive; not more than most men are, perhaps; but I felt a certain amount of satisfaction in seeing, when I went up to the window, that the curtain of my neighbour's window was not drawn.

The room was dimly lighted by a single candle. A woman was sitting at the table, I could not see her face; it was hidden by her hands; but I could see by the shuddering that passed over her figure that she was crying. It seemed to me that she was dressed in black.

"No doubt she has lost a husband or a brother in this war—not a son: she does not look old enough."

I felt it was treasonable to stand there hidden by the darkness. I lit my candle, and when I went back to the window Madame Gerder had drawn the curtain across hers.

Next day, when I opened my windows, Madame Gerder was on the leads watering her flowers out of a battered tin mug. I saw in the morning light that her gown was dark blue ; so I had not guessed rightly at the cause of her grief.

She looked up. No, it was impossible that the shrill voice which had jarred my nerves belonged to that quiet face—a face not beautiful according to the vulgar rendering of the word, but yet in which, spite of its ordinary features and dull complexion, there was to me a certain beauty of expression — a steadfast, mournful look, as if the earnest soul had been set a task almost beyond its strength, but, having it set, would not falter or dally wilfully, though it might faint by the way.

Here I pulled up my shirt collar and smiled.

There is surely a sentimental influence in this St. Roque. N.B.—I must remember not to come here with Jemima. I might say or do something sentimental, and I should never hear the last of such folly. I wonder, if Jemima had ever married, whether her husband would have been compelled to keep guard over his words ? I rather fancy it is for want of this reserve, or self-respect, or whatever it may be called, that so many husbands are henpecked. A woman, as I said before, is a charming creature when well kept under. I think Mr. Milverton is very sensible on this subject. You must always treat women with kindness and courtesy, not so much from any spontaneous feeling, or because they are only to be ruled by conciliation, and, to a great extent, cajolery, as from self-defence; the man who once lays his heart open to a woman and lets her spy out the weak places thereof, and then appeals to what he imagines are her great qualities, is for ever after a shorn Samson. She never forgets, never spares; she is, in fact, only to be governed by absolute authority; so handled that she fancies that she is pleasing herself; as to high souls and self-devotion, all that kind of feeling went out with Sir Charles Grandison and his charming Harriet. I hope I am not severe in my opinion—it is simply formed after careful study of the charming sex.

At this moment Madame Gerder looked me full in the face. My sentimentalism returned in full force, and a faint glimmer came to me that perhaps there might be another type of woman in the world than my sister, Jemima Brown.

How young Madame Gerder was!—not more than thirty; and yet her forehead was lined and her face stamped with anxiety—creases that will never wear out, I thought, as I watched her retreat across the leads and then disappear at the end of them down some steps which led, I imagine, into the house.

A small child toddled into the court in its night-gown, and immediately the same sharp cry of "Madame Leroux! Madame Leroux!" set my nerves ajar; it came from the laundress on the upper story; I felt glad it did not belong to my interesting neighbour with the quiet face and earnest eyes.

"Madame Leroux!" a third time, "why do you not listen when there is Victor, en chemise and with bare feet, catching frogs in the yard?"

I had wondered what the little fellow was groping for in the further corner among the cracked moss-grown stones.

A stout, rosy-cheeked woman plunged suddenly out of the shed that supported the leads along one side of the yard, seized Victor, and disappeared again.

Instead of going down into the salle, I stood waiting till Madame Gerder reappeared in her little room. Then I left the window and went to my breakfast. When I came up again she was seated at her table, working hard at embroidery.

I went over to Villers that morning; but when I came back there she was, still working with the same diligence. I stood at the window watching little Victor and his sister at play in the yard; but Madame Gerder never moved; she seemed unconscious of my presence.

"She will water her flowers in the evening," I thought, and actually I hurried upstairs after the table d'hôte dinner for the chance of seeing her.

Yes, there she was, tin mug in hand; but though I stood all the time at my window, she never once looked up or gave me a chance of speaking to her.

I had tired myself at Villers, and besides this, I had several letters to write. Why will women answer one's letters so quickly, and then write again before one has recovered the fatigue of a previous letter? The feminine mind is more impatient on this subject than on any other, and considering the marvellous productions that issue from the feminine pen—breathless sentences wandering ever so many ways at once—the writers of these letters should be content with the trouble they give their unhappy correspondents in the way of reading, without further expectation.

Women seem to write a good deal now-a-days. I sincerely hope they do not neglect other duties for it. I am willing to be liberal towards them, and I really think that provided, always provided, they do not neglect the duties of the family and the household, they may be permitted to write novels. I can fancy the writing a novel to be an easy, pleasant, harmless amusement, quite within the scope of a woman's power. I dare say it is an agreeable way of passing time, and I think it is an allowable relaxation.

Still I must write to Jemima, though why she should fill nearly two pages with an account of the cook's whitlow baffles me. I have a respect for cook, and if she suffers I am sorry for her; but I cannot do her whitlow any good. I know nothing about whitlows; then why inflict the progress of one on me? I wonder what Jemima would say if I were to write an account of Madame Gerder and her flowers? And yet the one subject is far more generally interesting than the other.

At this point of my reflections I rouse suddenly, as one rouses in the night from sleep; my eyes go at once, as if a magnet drew them there, to the window of my opposite neighbour. Her light has vanished, and yet she has not gone to bed, for the curtain is still undrawn. I look at my watch. Nine o'clock—not likely she would go to bed so soon. She has gone out then. But what a strangely late hour for a young woman to go out walking alone! Perhaps she embroiders for some of the shops, and has gone to take her work home; and then I remember how punctually every shop in St. Roque closes at eight o'clock.

"I am an old fool to notice and dwell on every little incident about this woman. I really am not *inquisitive,* and I think very little about women. Madame Gerder is certainly not an ordinary woman, but what is she to me? Besides, I am sure I saw a ring on her finger; I have always set myself against widows, and there is plainly no Monsieur Gerder in the case."

In five minutes I reach the Place St. Pierre, and while I pace up and down, smoking my cigar, beneath the vast darkness of the church, I think how exquisite its flèche must look silvered by bright moonlight. But as there is no moon, and the streets are deserted—St. Roque is a most surprising town in the way of early going to roost—I go back to the Hôtel Ste. Barbe. My landlady does not come forward to say good-night. I glance at the parlour, and catch a glimpse of Madame Mérand sitting erect, with an awful countenance. The little cringing Dupont stands before her, hat in hand, with drooping shoulders, his whole attitude suggestive of a whipped spaniel.

"Defend me from marriage," I think as I go upstairs.

When I got fairly into my room I saw before I lit my candle that my neighbour had returned. There she sat, her bonnet in her lap, her face not hidden in her hands, but her grief plainly to be seen as the light fell on her. My sympathy carried me out of all reserve. I stood watching her sorrow—sometimes an agonizing burst of tears, her handkerchief pressed to her eyes, while her body quivered with sobs, and then, as she quieted, a deep hushed stillness that seemed to me like despair.

Once I found myself opening the window. I suppose I was actually going across the leads to comfort her.

"Don't be an impulsive fool, John Brown!" The family name brought back the calm judgment that is said to go with it. I resolutely drew the curtains across my windows and lit my candle.

When I looked over the way, just before going to bed, my neighbour's light was out.

III.

It was very absurd, of course, but I have generally found that one's self-reproach lessens if one communicates it; and, as I said before, this article is strictly anonymous, therefore I confess, without defence or reservation, spite of its absurdity, that my last thought that night when I went to bed was Madame Gerder, and when I waked next morning it seemed also natural that my first thought was of her.

I looked out of window. There she was watering her flowers with the same steadfast, gentle look in her eyes I noticed yesterday.

I opened my window and I coughed. Victor and his sister, in one of the intervals of frog-hunting, heard the cough and looked up. They pointed their fat fingers, and cried, "V'là un m'sieur Anglais! Tiens, que c'est drôle!'

But Madame Gerder never looked off her flowers. I was glad of this. Children are sweet innocents, I do not doubt, to their mothers, and I do not dislike them myself, clean, quiet, and under the care of a respectable nurse, who knows how to check their silly little speeches; but at these words my ears tingled and my face was hot.

Why should it be droll to be an Englishman? Or do these begrimed little idiots mean that there is anything droll about me? "Bah! bah!" as my landlady says; they want whipping.

My landlady's name suggested a vent for the curiosity which tormented me. Curiosity is not the word; it was rather a friendly sympathy with this poor widow, and a wish, if that were possible, to relieve her sorrow.

I will say for Madame Mérand that she must be a very clever woman, and she must be also that which clever women are not always —an excellent economizer of time. She has always time to speak to me in a collected and gracious manner, even when I see the chef looming white in the distance beside the great trough in the courtyard, or Ferdinand, the head garçon, standing at the door of the salle à manger, both frenzied with eagerness to get the mistress's ear. I am always sorry when I interfere with the chef; he is a genius in his way; his vol-au-vents and his chapon aux truffes are triumphs which no ordinary mind could achieve. He is a good-looking fellow too, especially in his spotless white costume; but Ferdinand I have in aversion. He is always in a bustle; and he has twice in his officious haste spilled soup over me, and then drawn the attention of the whole table d'hôte to the fact by his vociferations of surprise and regret. He was chattering as fast as he could at the parlour door when I reached it, asking for a holiday, I think.

Madame Mérand heard my steps before she saw me.

"Va-t-en, paresseux!" in such a deep, stern voice that I started, and congratulated myself on not being Monsieur Dupont.

Ferdinand disappeared so suddenly, that to this day I cannot imagine what became of him.

"Madame," I said, with a lower bow than usual—for, in spite of the smile that greeted me, that "Va-t-en, paresseux!" had made me tremble in my boots—"can you tell me what is the matter with the young woman you mentioned to me as Madame Gerder? She seems in great trouble."

I wished I had held my tongue. Madame's eyes opened widely—dear me! what great, black, staring things they are, and how very rudely some women can stare!—and then her smile broadened till it seemed to reach me, and tell me I was a fool.

I suppose I reddened. I certainly pulled my collar up. It is not the sort of thing one expects when one pays one's bill weekly, and gives as little trouble as possible, that one's landlady should venture to laugh because one asks a simple question. Insolent old vixen!—for she is much older than she looks, I know.

"I believe Madame Gerder is very unhappy, monsieur. Her husband has gone away from her, and she can give no reason for his departure."

"Ah, indeed!"—I spoke as indifferently as possible, though I confess to disappointment—"I thought she was a widow."

"If she were, perhaps she would not grieve so much." Madame spoke ironically, I thought.

"Why so, madame?"

"Monsieur should be as good a judge as I am." Madame tried to speak politely. "There is nothing so valuable as that which we cannot have. Death will turn lead or tinsel into fine gold. Death in life is another matter, monsieur, is it not?"

The last words were spoken with a sentiment I had not thought my landlady capable of.

She looked sad, almost subdued, as if she would have liked to prolong our talk; but I was not in a mood to talk sentiment with Madame Mérand. She had laughed at me, and I do not easily forget when a woman laughs at me. My idea of a woman is sweetness, gentleness, an incapacity for giving pain; and it is extremely painful for me to feel that I have made myself ridiculous.

I walked down the Rue Notre Dame, and then on and on, till I found myself beyond the octroi. I took no heed of my way or of the people I met; I was deep in pondering this story of Madame Gerder.

Here was Madame Mérand, with a temper which even I trembled to provoke, and her husband appeared content to abide with her, while this gentle, sweet creature, who looked so full of love, was deserted.

And Madame Gerder must have been married for herself: she looked as if she had been always poor and always industrious. I had watched the deftness with which her needle sped in and out of her embroidery, the neatness and order of her room.

"What pretext could a man find for deserting such a woman?"

There was only one—he was a Frenchman, and therefore fickle. No wonder the poor woman grieved—though why women do grieve, and try to bring back fellows of that kind, is to me always incomprehensible. Can't they or won't they see that the mistake has been on their side? They have chosen unsuitably. No length of union will ever make two souls one where the fusion has not been simultaneous. But hold—I am going too far. I have only to look round in England, and the amount of patchwork I shall find in marriage, compared with the perfect seamless garment boys and girls dream of and novels picture, is terrible, and I stop. I was stopped at this point, not in reasoning, but in reality. A very fat man, with his legs wide apart and his hat in his hand, smiling till his face looked like the moon at the full, stood in my path.

"Pardon, monsieur! Bonjour, monsieur! Ah! it is warm, is it not, for walking?"

Monsieur le Petit, the respectable hair-dresser of the Rue St. Jean, wiped his shining bald head with his bright orange handkerchief.

"Well," said I, "I had not thought about the heat, Monsieur le Petit."

"Tiens!"—the astute hair-cutter put his parrot nose on one side, and looked at me out of his long brown eyes. "Tiens! and yet in the country which monsieur inhabits there is, I am told, no sunshine—almost always rain and fog?"

"Not quite so bad as that; but I did not mean to say it is not hot, Monsieur le Petit, only I had not felt it."

"Aha! that is another affair." His face twitched. "Monsieur is, perhaps, thinking of the war, and the disgrace which an infamous tyranny has brought to France! Ah, mon Dieu! for me, monsieur, I eat not, I sleep not. I have no sons, but I feel all the same. I see all around me sorrow and distress. There is hardly a home in St. Roque which the cursed war has not desolated."

A thought crossed my mind. Had this missing husband joined the army?

"Do you know any one of the name of

Gerder ?" I asked, and became at once aware that I must be looking sheepish.

The hair-dresser's eyes kindled; his nose quivered like the nose of a hungry spaniel.

"Aha! monsieur has heard of that affair? Ma foi, but it is a horror, a scandal of the most dreadful, that a young woman, quiet, unoffending, gentille, what will you—if she only knew how to coiffer herself—should be so suddenly left by her husband. Monsieur is acquainted with the poor young woman? It is sad, is it not, monsieur?"

He was in such a quiver of curiosity that I stiffened. It seemed as if every one was prying into my thoughts this morning.

"No, I have no acquaintance with Madame Gerder. I have heard of her grief, that is all. I thought her husband might have joined the army."

"Of his own will, monsieur?" The hair-dresser laid his finger along his very movable nose, and winked his sly brown eyes. "Monsieur, to join the army willingly at this time would be the act of a hero, and Gerder is not a hero; he is a dancing-master. He has run away from war; he has not gone to meet it.

That is my opinion. I believe he has gone to London."

"Gone to London, and left his wife here to starve!" I checked myself, for the hair-dresser's curious eyes were fixed on me.

"Plait-il, monsieur, but a woman who can sew and embroider need not starve. Madame Gerder is unhappy, but she has not a large appetite. No, she will not starve. Au revoir, monsieur."

It seemed to me that when my fat little friend put his hat on after his farewell bow he clapped his hand on the pocket of his breeches.

"These Frenchmen are monkeys," I thought. "The little glutton!—I am sure he is a glutton. He imagined I meant to appeal to his liberality."

Here I remembered that against my fixed resolution I was actually on the road to La Maladrérie. A vision of la mère Chuquet rose before me. I turned back hastily, and could hardly keep from running home to the Hôtel Ste. Barbe.

IV.

It was the fourth day since I had given up my room; the general of division had gone back to his quarters, and I might have gone back to mine, but the back windows of my new room had become too interesting. And yet each day had been a repetition of the first: flower-watering, morning and evening, by my pale, dark-eyed neighbour on the leads; constant stitching in the daytime; frog-hunting by those chubby, seldom-washed urchins in the yard; shrill outcries for Madame Leroux from the laundress; then the mysterious night errand; and then sobs and tears, and perplexed sympathy from myself.

"Why does she only cry at night?"

I stood thinking. Jemima takes pleasure in saying men are slow-witted, and she is complimentary enough to say that I am especially dull in piecing facts together. It may be so, but the conclusions to which this rapid female piecing leads are so often distorted and impossible that I prefer my own slower way. I had gone on thinking that Madame Gerder put a constraint on herself, and only allowed herself to cry at bed-time, as we let a fountain play at stated hours.

"Something happens to grieve her while she is out." The thought fitted itself into my mind with such weight and precision that I felt it had reason in it. I stood waiting, as I often do, to see what would follow. Jemima never understands this system. She thinks me dull and stupid when I am only trying to let my thoughts turn themselves round.

"Why not see where she goes ?"

I might have thought of this before. Yes, on this occasion I certainly have been "slow-witted."

The table d'hôte dinner-bell rings and I go down. It is surprising how little interest I take in that which goes on around me. I am not a novel-reader. I consider fiction unworthy the attention of a reasonable man, and perhaps for this reason I attach extra importance to the events of life, but I feel, when I go back to my bedroom, that I am going to begin a fresh chapter of an interesting book. There is mystery in the affair which makes my ears tingle. What would Jemima or any of my friends say if they knew that steady quiet I contemplate anything so out of the usual routine of life as that of following a woman of whom I know nothing when she goes out alone in the evening? I wish it to be distinctly understood that I am not afraid of Jemima. If I were afraid, I should never tell her anything which she might be likely to laugh at.

It seems as if it never would grow dusk this evening. I resolve to stay in my room instead of taking my usual stroll; it is better not to risk the chance of missing Madame Gerder. I grow feverish with excitement. I cannot look out of window even. I feel as if my purpose were written on my face; and although my neighbour seldom raises her head from that incessant stitching, still she may find out that I am watching her, and so possibly may give up the evening errand.

Madame Leroux, too, the mother of the little frog-hunters, has been in the yard lately, and has stared very inquisitively at my windows.

I am resolved *she* shall not have the chance of saying an Englishman is "droll." Droll! Such a misplaced term altogether! Call us dull, monotonous, sober-minded; but it is impossible that there can be anything ridiculous in the calm decorum of a well-bred Englishman, for to my mind a well-bred man never betrays either surprise or admiration, or any of the more feminine impulses which give room for ridicule in spectators.

I try to read, but my book has no power to fix my attention; it lies on the table while I sit upright in my chair; there is no union between us. I get up and walk about. I have not felt such a restless excitement to get rid of time since my first pantomime, or perhaps later on. Ah me! in that shamefaced hobbledehoy period, so full of delight and smarting, when I used to long for the one evening of the week when I might call on Muriel Rose. Poor, sweet, fickle Muriel! It always has puzzled me how a fair fragile creature, with a name as pretty as herself, could marry as she did—Muriel Bull. And Bull is such a blockhead!

This thought of my old love helps me. I have taken care to find out the name of the street in which Madame Gerder's house stands; and a little while before her usual starting time I button up my coat, slouch my wide-awake over my eyes, and go to find the Rue Puits d'Amour, the street at the back of the Hôtel Ste. Barbe.

At this distance of time I cannot say why I thus disguise myself; I suppose my feelings have got overwrought by the suspense. I am inclined to this thought by the circumstance of having recalled that Muriel Rose story—one of the rare points in my life in which I seem to myself ridiculous. I rather fancy I wrote verses at that time; I know I made some half-a-dozen, all ending with the same line: "Oh, Muriel Rose!" And one of the rhymes, I am positive, was "nose," and another "sloes," for Muriel has dark blue eyes. Silly girl! how she threw herself away! I believe I ought to be glad. She had grown immensely fat when I saw her last; her eyes were scarcely visible, her nose was red at the tip, and I think there are nine little Bulls.

All this time I am waiting in the Rue Puits d'Amour, opposite the house which I fancy is Madame Gerder's.

Yes, here she is, coming out of the shabby doorway in her dark cloak—so dark that, as she turns swiftly down the street, it is difficult to see her in the darkness. On she goes till we come out in the Place St. Etienne, then she twists round so suddenly that we nearly come face to face. I pretend to go on a few steps, lest she should detect me; but as I glance over my shoulder I see she is diving down a narrow turning on the left. I only follow just in time; she speeds along like a dart, except that she turns and winds in and out so constantly that I have lost all count of whereabouts I am, when she stops and then disappears.

I do not know myself this evening. Instead of hesitating or demurring, I follow blindly into the darkness where I last saw madame. It is an open passage, full of bad smells, and as dark as the street outside.

"My good friend," I say to myself, "you are in a rash mood to-night; you may lose your watch and your purse just for the sake of idle curiosity. What would—hang it! my life's my own; I don't live for my watch or for Jemima. I will know where Madame Gerder goes."

As I announce this resolution I stumble against stairs; I stretch out my hand and find a baluster. A door above me opens and then is gently closed. This is discouraging; for although I have been capable of tracking Madame Gerder, I cannot listen through a keyhole. This is what I tell myself as I begin to mount the stairs. I go very slowly; the stairs are old, and they creak; and somehow it is not easy to go up a strange staircase in utter darkness without stopping now and then to feel your way.

At last I come to an end—at least, the stairs do. I look about, but there is no glimmer of light from any of the doors, which I guess must be beside me; no sound of voices.

It seems to me as if another self, more like Jemima, rebukes me.

"You're a fool, John Brown," it says in a cool, amused voice; "and you have not only made yourself ridiculous, but you have done it for nothing."

I feel glad it is dark, my face has grown so hot. I stand listening.

Hark! what is that? a cough? Yes, a decided cough, and then a snarling, snapping voice.

I cannot make out words, but I feel sure there are speakers not far off, and that they are above me.

I grope cautiously, and presently find some more stairs on my right hand, more like a ladder than stairs; but I go up confidently, for the voices grow more and more distinct. As I mount, light shines through long chinks above me, and when I reach the uneven floor at the top of the ladder I see that I have got to the roof, and that this is merely a grenier boarded off. A woman is speaking, no need to listen at the keyhole; quiet as the voice is, its earnestness makes each word distinct.

"But, Achille, it is not so long; if thou wouldst return to-morrow thy absence might be explained and thy pupils might be recovered."

"Bah! bah! bah! Thou art a fool, Eugénie—a selfish fool too. What! for the gain of a few francs—for at my first lesson I should be captured—thou wouldst risk the liberty, possibly the life, of thy husband!

Ciel! what egotists these women are—true monsters of egotism! To spare thy fingers a few stitches thou wouldst send me to face these Prussian devils—for they are not men. And I tell thee, Eugénie, I could never stand to be shot at; and why should I? I have good legs, and I should put them to the use for which they were given me, and then I should be disgraced—what do I know?—shot dead, for running away. Ahi!"

He seems to smother his head in terror.

"No, no; it is not for that. Oh, Achille, my husband"—there is a sob in Madame Gerder's voice—"only come back to me, or let me stay here with thee. I will work just as hard. It is not that I grieve for."

"Bêtise!" he snaps like an angry cur. "What is it, then? All again egotism; I do not believe in thy love! Parbleu! love cares for the welfare of the thing loved, not its own. I am very well here. I lie in bed, it is true, but I have plenty of tobacco, and I have some feuilletons, and I am in general content with the food thou bringest. I tell thee I am content, and that is enough; it is only thy tormenting disposition which disturbs my life."

"Life!" and then she drew a deep breath. It seemed to me that she must be having a hard fight to keep down her contempt. Not a bit of it. On she went again, trying to soothe the selfish coward with loving words:

"Achille, my beloved—idol of my heart—listen to me. I believe thou wilt be as safe in our own apartment as here. Other husbands are not torn from their wives. I have questioned and inquired, and I am sure of what I say. Is it not better to take this little risk than to lie here useless and idle? Kiss me, Achille. I do not mean it as reproach—I could not."

"Ah, morbleu! No, madame. A kiss! Go away, I say. Get up from thy knees, crocodile—get out of my sight; and to-morrow when thou bringest my supplies leave them at the door—at the door. Dost thou hear? The door will be closed — bolted. Understandest thou? It is not for nothing thou hast insulted thy husband and thy master."

One more faint "Achille!" but his vociferation drowns it. I grope farther along the flooring, which seems more spacious than the landing below, and presently, as I expected, a door is cautiously opened and shut, and Madame Gerder glides down into the darkness.

I wait till I can no longer hear her footsteps, but I have to put a strong constraint on myself. I so long to give the miserable coward in this grenier the chastisement he deserves!

When I reach the street I am fairly puzzled. I fancy I must have made the circuit of St. Roque in my efforts after the Hôtel Ste. Barbe; but I reach it at last. When I get to my room Madame Gerder's window is curtained for the night.

V.

"A LETTER for monsieur."

I went to the curtained door and took the letter from the femme de chambre.

I was going to pocket it till breakfast time. It was, of course, from Jemima, and would keep, and I wanted to watch for my neighbour's appearance among her flowers—as yet her window remained curtained—but I just glanced at the envelope. Even a hasty glance showed that the letter was not in Jemima's handwriting.

I opened it at once. It was from the very friend I had dined with only a fortnight ago on the eve of his departure for Havre. He writes from Havre now. He has mislaid or lost his passport, and is "in a fix," he says; because he speaks with a decided Yorkshire twang, and has a silky black beard, the fact of his being an Englishman is doubted. Knowing that I have some acquaintance with the authorities here, he asks me in charity to go over to him without delay. I can go by the Orne steamer, he says, which obviates all changes on the way. He knows he is asking a great favour, but what can he do?

"Confound him!" I look over the way. The window has been opened, but the curtain remains drawn. I fear my neighbour is ill, and my heart aches; and then my blood boils over with rage as I think of the coward yonder, smoking as he lies reading the foul trash he calls "feuilletons."

"If I start by the boat at once I may get back by the train this evening."

Really, for a man of my deliberate habits, I planned all this with amazing dispatch.

Though I had spent some time in St. Roque, I had never had the curiosity to go and inspect the miserable little steamer that plies daily down the Orne, and then across the mouth of the Seine to Havre. There are circumstances in every one's life which are treated of best in gaps, and my voyage in the Orne steamer is one of these. I simply state that we carried about a score of Norman peasants, chiefly women, a couple of cows, some sheep, a large family of pigs, and that the boat rolled horribly when we reached the mouth of the Orne. After this I will only add that by the time I reached Havre, or "Avver," as a British lady at Frascati's called it, I was not in a mood to return to St. Roque the same afternoon.

My friend had actually found his passport, and was at the landing-place when I reached it. I do not think I ever felt so cross in my life. To have been dragged away in the midst of the most interesting adventure I had ever chanced on, to have endured those three hours of disgust and anguish, for the sake of seeing a man grinning at me from the quay and calling me "a capital fellow!"

I got rid of him at last on the plea of a headache, and then I walked out of Frascati's and sat down on the beach.

In the quiet cool spot I had chosen, with the vast empty sea before me, I went over in thought the little drama of the previous night, and I asked myself if it was really I, myself, John Brown, grey-haired and respectable, who had so acted. Had I really followed a woman to a strange house, and actually listened to her conversation? If I had been capable of wearing a paper collar I think it might have ignited, so sudden and intense was the heat of my face and ears.

I got up and walked about.

This place is much hotter than St. Roque. I shall go back by the first train to-morrow.

VI.

It seemed like going home as the train sped on between the brilliant fruited trees of the orchards. When I came in sight of the low flat meadows with tall poplar fringes that surround the many-spired city of St. Roque, what a contrast it made to the noisy bustle of Havre, with its streets full of soldiers and disorder!

The railway station is not far from the caserne. I saw a crowd there, and I asked a man in a blouse what was going on.

"Only a fresh levy gone off by train—more food for the Prussian guns," he said, sulkily.

I turned away; I began to wish myself back in England.

The street that leads from the suburb into St. Roque is full of old grey houses, with here and there a grating under an arched doorway, showing a glimpse of colour and verdure, trimly kept flower beds, backed by creeping plants and clustering vines.

Happy homes within those old walls, and each one has had to yield its victim for this accursed war!

The street looked empty when I turned into it, but suddenly under a recessed doorway I come upon a woman in a dark cloak.

She has not heard my footsteps. She leans with her face against the hard stones; but she is not crying.

I have no time for reflection. I see that it is Madame Gerder.

"Madame, pardon me"—I seem to know the way to her heart by instinct. "Is anything the matter with your husband?"

She gives me such a look! There is keen inquiry and despair, and for a moment revolt, but this only for an instant. The effort to speak brings tears along with her words.

"Ah, yes! they have taken him, monsieur. My Achille is dragged away to die with the army."

"I trust not." The words come of themselves, but they nearly choke me. Will it not be the best possible event in Madame Gerder's life if her miserable, cowardly sneak of a husband is put out of the way with as little delay as possible? But common sense has no chance with sympathy against such eyes as Madame Gerder's. They are simply beautiful when you look into them; they pierce me through with their agony of sorrow.

"What am I to do for you?" I say fervently. "You must let me help you."

"Monsieur is English"—she clasps her hands—"but monsieur can tell me whether I could follow my husband if he goes on to Paris?"

"I fear not, madame. Very soon, I believe, the capital will be so hemmed in that ingress or egress will be alike impossible. But, madame, if you will point out any way in which I can serve you I shall be grateful."

She smiles, though tears come fast streaming over her pale face. I have rarely seen a woman look attractive in tears—Madame Gerder is charming.

"Monsieur is very kind"—a little courtesy here. "I do not know how to thank him; but no one but the good God can help me now. Ah, if I can only get to my husband! He is not used to be roughly treated, monsieur. He has delicate health. If they will only let me do what I can for him, that is all I hope for, monsieur—all I want; but I thank you always from the bottom of my heart."

A thought comes to me.

"You would like to follow your husband to Rouen?"

"Yes, monsieur."

I hurry back to the station, and learn when the next departure will be for Lisieux. I dare not offer money to Madame Gerder—something in her face forbids it—but she looks very sweet and grateful when I put the railway ticket in her hand, and bid her Godspeed.

As the train rolls by her carriage passes me, and she gives me so touching a look that I feel quite foolish.

I wonder whether that miserable husband was glad to see her sweet face again, and whether he came alive out of the war? When I next visit St. Roque—and I think it will be soon—I must learn these facts from Madame Mérand or my fat friend, Monsieur le Petit. I often wonder what will happen should I find Madame Gerder a widow. She is the most interesting woman I have ever seen—there is no doubt about it.

THE STORY OF FRANÇOISE.

THE STORY OF FRANÇOISE.

I.

"I TELL you, monsieur, that the child must not be excited. Surely since this accursed war began there has been enough to disquiet us women; and now we are to have a rascally Prussian officer quartered on us, only because he is not strong enough to rough it with his soldiers. Tiens!" Here Célestine threw back her broad head, and planted her hands firmly on her hips. "Monsieur, ma'mselle is not strong either, though she has rosy cheeks and bright eyes."

Monsieur Serret raised his mild eyes to remonstrate with his old servant, but Célestine's attitude daunted him. She looked as firm as a rock. Her thick, black eyebrows seemed to bristle, and her long earrings to quiver with impatience. Her flat, broad face was redder than ever with indignation.

"I am busy," her master said. "You can go and mind the shop, Célestine."

Monsieur Serret was the bookseller of Archon, and Célestine was his femme de charge—his housekeeper—and the foster-mother of his daughter Françoise.

Ever since he lost his wife—ten years ago—Monsieur Serret had been growing more and more reserved and abstracted. When he was not serving a customer, he was sure to be deep in some learned old book, both hands plunged in his long hair, deaf and insensible to all that went on around him.

Françoise had been brought up in a convent at Rouen. She had been at home a year now, and the house had brightened up under her gaiety. She was wild and mischief-loving, but she was sweet and gentle too. Célestine said, "Ma'mselle's frolics never come to faults;" but her aunt, Madame Viegron, shook her head.

"If my Victoire and my Adèle were to say the things you say, Françoise, I should tremble for their future."

The good, wooden-faced aunt thought she did her duty by thus protesting, but her words acted as a spur to her niece's mischief and gave mortal offence to Célestine.

It would have been wiser to consult Madame Viegron, the mother of a family, about the health of Françoise, instead of pouring out doubts and anxieties into the unwilling and preoccupied ears of Monsieur Serret; but Célestine could not forgive any one who found fault with her young mistress. If she were to tell Madame Viegron of the strange symptoms which had so distressed her in Ma'mselle Françoise, she thought she should be providing the aunt with texts for fresh sermons.

"She will say, 'If Françoise faints, it is because she walks too far and too fast;' and, 'No wonder her heart palpitates; she is always in a state of excitement.' Yes, yes, I know; and Madame Viegron will never see my child as she can be, alone with those who love her. It is not possible she can love madame her aunt."

"Ma'mselle—Ma'mselle Françoise!" Célestine had gone upstairs when she left Monsieur Serret, and she stood at the top of the first flight looking along the dark passage which led to Françoise's room. There was not a bit of colour here, supposing there had been light to show it. The boards, even, were stained a dark hue. While Célestine stood at the stairs' head, the door at the end of the long narrow passage opened, and a sudden flood of sunshine poured in and lighted up the figure standing in the doorway. It is more true to say that Françoise looked like an embodiment of sunshine—her bright brown eyes dancing with mirth, her small figure full of graceful movement at the disturbance in Célestine's face; she clapped her hands together and laughed out.

Her hands were small and well-shaped and dimpled; but they were more than these. Françoise never used them obtrusively, and yet they had the faculty of being singularly expressive, like all the rest of her, they were so full of eager, graceful life.

You have not seen her face distinctly, because she has been standing against the light. She turns now, and leads Célestine into her room, and you see how delicate the colour is on her transparent skin, and how bright the red on her parted lips.

"Thou dear old worry!" she says, mischievously, and she pinches her nurse's arm. "What is the last misery? Has a ceiling fallen in, or has Michon upset the pot-au-feu ? or has thy friend the chef hanged himself in despair ?"

"Ma'mselle"—Célestine blushes, and her two hands go up in protest ; she likes to be supposed to have an admirer, although she disdains his admiration—"how often must I repeat that Monsieur Jules, of the Hôtel de France, is as indifferent to me as one of his casseroles ? Fi donc, ma'mselle ! But I have news—and news which will not please thee, my dear child."

Célestine looks as doleful as possible. She wishes to prevent her young lady from hearing the news suddenly, for she has remarked that any sudden excitement affects her strangely ; but Françoise only laughs.

"Thou art a dear old raven. Tell me this minute, or I will not stay to listen. Come, be quick, I tell thee."

"Ma'mselle does not like the Prussians—ciel ! is there a Frenchwoman that does not hate and curse them in her heart ?—and monsieur has but now told me that an officer—what do I know ? it may be the old villain Moltke himself—is billeted on the house, and he will arrive perhaps directly."

The colour flits suddenly from the young bright face, and a look of woeful sadness clouds her eyes.

"It is terrible!" she says. "Célestine, thou must arrange that I may never see him. It is so soon. I always see in every Prussian the murderer of my cousin Gustave."

"Well, I can manage. I will do the best I can, ma'mselle, and there is no time to lose."

She closes the door behind her and comes slowly along the passage.

"Ah! it is terrible that books should make a man so forgetful." Célestine arches her black brows. "I would like to make a bonfire of monsieur's books out in the yard there. He forgets everything, even the death of his brother's son, shot to death with German bullets: and such a sweet, fair-faced lad, only sixteen. Ma foi! if he had lived he would have been a brother to ma'mselle; she would have had indeed some one to take care of her."

There came a rather hesitating knock at the door below, and Célestine hurried to open it, her sturdy sides shaking with the extra exertion as she went downstairs.

An officer in Prussian uniform stood at the door. He was tall and distinguished-looking, so different from all Célestine's expectations that, in her stupor of surprise, she opened the door wide as to some honoured visitor, and dropped a deep courtesy.

"This is the house of Monsieur Serret, is it not?" The officer spoke broken French, but his accent was pleasant, and his face so very winning that Célestine's anger melted like snow in sunshine.

"Ma foi, what bright blue eyes he has, and what a smile! Well, if ma'mselle should see him by chance, it is all the better that he is not an ogre."

The officer seemed weak and languid. He followed Célestine slowly upstairs, and when she ushered him into his room he sank on a chair exhausted.

He could not have made a better appeal to Célestine. Nursing was her special province, and this need of her skill was irresistible. In a few minutes she had brought a cup of broth for her lodger, and had placed some pillows on his sofa.

"M'sieur is truly weak, but we will have him different-looking in a week," she said, with a motherly glance at his pale face.

Célestine was carefully and fairly discreet, but that night, when she was helping Françoise to undress, her tongue got the better of her discretion.

"Ma'mselle, the Prussian is much better than I thought. He is not even ugly; he is tall, and he has blue eyes and a fair moustache and a charming smile, and the poor soul is wounded."

Françoise turned round with a grave surprised face.

"Célestine, I do not wish to hear of this person or to see him. It is a sufficient humiliation that my father, a true Frenchman, must tolerate in his house one of the invaders."

Célestine muttered, as she opened the doors of the tall armoire and laid her young mistress's gown smoothly on one of the empty shelves:

"Chut, vieille bavarde!—that thy foolish tongue must utter folly. It is not to be supported."

Meanwhile Adolphe von Holst congratulated himself.

"It is so pleasant and quiet here," he said; "no smell of beer and stale tobacco. I shall be able to read without disturbance."

Next day, as he went out after dinner with a book in his hand, he met Monsieur Serret.

"Monsieur is fond of reading?" said the bookseller. "We have plenty of books here to lend to monsieur."

Adolphe von Holst bowed. His pleasant refined face had ingratiated him at once with his host.

"It seems to me"—he spoke with much deference—"that I give more trouble in your house, monsieur, than is needful. I am quite willing to join your dinner-table if you will receive me there."

In his abstraction Monsieur Serret was beginning to say, "By all means," but Célestine had been within hearing. She came up and whispered to her master.

"Ah, I forgot, monsieur. My daughter has delicate health, and she"—here the bookseller's politeness showed him that he could not tell the truth—"she—well, her nurse"—with a helpless glance at Célestine—"thinks it better she should not see strangers."

The officer bowed.

"I beg pardon. I was not aware you had children."

Célestine stood a little in the background, shrugging her shoulders and pressing her lips together. "Ma foi! what fools men make of themselves! They know no more how to get out of a difficulty than a cow knows how to climb a tree. Why need he tell this stranger the very thing I did not want him to know?"

"Well"—Monsieur Serret blinked his short-sighted eyes—"my daughter is hardly a child; she is—how old is Françoise, Célestine?"

But Célestine had slipped back out of sight into the shop, and at this moment her shrill voice sounded out:

"Monsieur is wanted tout de suite!"

Adolphe von Holst felt extremely interested, but there was nothing for it but to bow and pass on.

Monsieur Serret found Célestine instead of a customer when he stepped up the two wooden steps that led into his den.

"Comment?" and he looked like a dog robbed of a bone. A soldier fond of reading was to him a phenomenon, and he wished to continue his talk with the Prussian. He looked over his shoulder, but the lieutenant had departed.

"Comment? there is no one," he repeated. "Tell me, Célestine, what does this mean?"

Monsieur strove to concentrate his attention so as to look dignified.

Célestine snapped her fingers.

"Monsieur, I laugh at Madame Viegron for her fussy, foolish ways, but even I would not be so indiscreet as to tell a roaring wolf of a Prussian that he was living under the same roof with a beautiful young girl."

Monsieur Serret plunged his right hand into his hair and looked bewildered.

"I do not see the harm." Then with sudden relief, "Why, Célestine, you yourself said this officer was different from what you expected."

"But that makes no difference to ma'mselle. He is a Prussian all the same." Célestine spoke hotly and set her feet wider apart than ever. "As long as he knew nothing there was no risk; now he will not rest till he has seen her, *I* know; and then ma'mselle will think of the dear boy Gustave, and——"

"Ah bah! You are foolish."

Her master turned to the shelves behind him, and lifted down a heavy volume. He opened it and planted both elbows on the pages. Célestine knew this mood; she was obliged to retreat.

Meantime Lieutenant von Holst sauntered along towards the tree-shaded boulevard of the old French town. He was smiling softly to himself as he went.

"What a joke! And that old woman did not want me to know of her young lady's existence! She is a veritable dragon. Well"—he stroked his moustache thoughtfully—"Adolphe, my friend, thou hast no need to think about young girls; and yet life is very dull since we left off fighting. For fellows who smoke and drink life has always something, but for me it is different, and one grows tired of books. I can neither smoke nor drink with impunity."

He looked round him; there were seats placed at intervals under the trees, and on one of these a young girl was sitting.

He looked at her as he passed by, and he saw a bright face full of sparkling expression.

"If one could only find an excuse for speaking!" At that moment the young girl looked up; her eyes rested on his face and then they took in his dress. She looked away with an expression of pain and aversion.

The lieutenant quickened his pace till he was out of sight of the bench beneath the trees.

"It is always so," he said. "How true-hearted these French girls are! We are not men to them; they see only the Prussian uniform. It makes one long to vindicate one's self. That is a sweet little creature, but I should like to see those dark eyes with a less bitter look in them. I wonder if the bookseller's daughter is pretty? If she were ugly the duenna would be less watchful."

Adolphe von Holst went home. He left the door of his room ajar. He even went up and down stairs several times on a vague pretext of seeking Célestine, but he did not get a glimpse of Françoise.

His window was exactly over the entrance door. It was impossible to see any one leave or enter the house; but Adolphe had noticed that at the further end of the long entrance passage there was a glass door leading to the garden or yard at the back of the house.

"Why do I not go and look out of that door?" he said.

He went downstairs again and found his way to the glass door. He did not open it, but he looked out. It was not a garden—only a square courtyard paved with round knobs of stones, with brick walls round it. In the midst stood a lime-tree, not cut into a formal shape, but spreading its branches, and making a pleasant shade beneath them.

On the right of the glass door was an open staircase painted green, and from the top of this an outside gallery ran along the back of the house and one of the side walls of the court. Several doors appeared in this side wall leading to the gallery.

"I see," said the lieutenant, thoughtfully; "this is a large house; there are other rooms there which mademoiselle inhabits, and she probably uses this green staircase instead of that one indoors. Good! that is why I have never seen her. I think a turn in the yard will be very cool and pleasant."

But when he tried to turn the handle of the glass door he found it was locked.

Adolphe muttered some ugly German words, but he stood looking out into the yard.

There was suddenly a piteous mewing, almost like a child in pain or terror, and then something small and white fell on the round hard stones of the yard. A simultaneous cry, a rush of hurried feet, and then a light figure sprang down half the green staircase at a bound and knelt on the hard round stones of the yard.

The Lieutenant von Holst shook the glass door furiously.

There, close to him and yet inaccessible, kneeling beside the poor little bruised kitten, was the bright face that had so charmed him on the boulevard.

"Au secours! au secours, Célestine!" cried the young girl.

At the name "Célestine" the lieutenant made a prudent retreat to the staircase.

Célestine was in the kitchen, and this lay beyond the shop. Françoise called several times, and at last the sound reached her nurse. Célestine rushed frantically to the glass door, and opened it with a key which hung by her side, but for once she did not stay to close it.

She was too anxious about her darling to think just then of Prussian wolves. When the lieutenant came softly downstairs again, a few moments after, the glass door stood wide open.

"Poor little puss!"

Célestine jumped up at the sound of a voice.

She gave a gasp of surprise when she saw the lodger close beside her. But Adolphe von Holst was not looking at her; his eyes were fixed on Françoise, as she sat hugging the kitten in her arms.

"Is it much hurt?" he said, gently.. "Perhaps mademoiselle will let me see if I can do any good? I understand broken bones."

Françoise had forgotten all her prejudices. She looked up trustingly in the stranger's face, while he took the kitten in his arms. He felt it carefully.

"Good! There are not any broken bones. If mademoiselle will trust me with the cure, I do not think it will be long."

Françoise looked very sweet while she thanked him; but Célestine had gone back to the glass door and she was holding it open, with a decided frown on her black brows. The lieutenant bowed to Françoise, and went away with the kitten under his arm.

"How pretty she is!" And then a look of dissatisfaction came into his face.

"What have I to do with pretty girls? We may be called off to active service to-morrow."

II.

It is a warm afternoon. The sun has so much heat that if the leaves did not fall with that crisp sound on the round stones of the yard, you might think it was summer still. There is a bench under the lime tree, and on this are seated the Lieutenant von Holst and Françoise Serret.

A week has gone by since the accident, and the kitten is playing with a ball of wool, as if nothing had ever ailed it. The ball belongs to the knitting which lies in the girl's lap, and the next jerk will bring it to the ground; but Françoise takes no heed. What is she doing? She is not listening to Adolphe, for he has scarcely spoken since they sat down side by side. But there is a happy smile on her face; and if you could see under the long curving lashes that almost touch her glowing cheeks, you would find the soft dark eyes swimming in blissful tears. Françoise dares not raise them. She knows that Adolphe's eyes are fixed on her, and she has seen the love that speaks in them. She dares not let him know how fondly her heart answers that unspoken appeal.

This week has been like a delightful dream to Françoise. At first she saw the young officer for a few minutes at a time. He only wished—so he told Célestine—to give her young mistress a daily report of the kitten's progress. It was more hurt than he had thought, he said. But the little interviews lengthened. The officer had a volume of Goethe's lyrics, and he offered to help Mademoiselle Serret to read them when she said she was only an imperfect German scholar.

"Very kind, very kind indeed; it is always well to learn," Monsieur Serret said, when Célestine told him of the lieutenant's proposal.

Célestine shrugged her shoulders and made some wrathful objections; but with father and daughter both against her she was subdued.

It had been skilfully planned on Adolphe's part. At first interest about her kitten had blinded Françoise, and before she had time to remember that its benefactor was a Prussian came her gratitude for its cure; and then followed the new interest in life which this reading opened. Françoise had never yet loved, but the warm, impulsive heart was full of unyielded love, and every day she was learning, partly from Goethe's wondrous love-songs, partly in her teacher's eyes, to know for what her heart was seeking.

To-day they had reached a new stage in their friendship—the kitten, the book, had alike lost interest. They had been sitting there under the lime-tree, and no word or look from the young girl had betrayed her happiness. A close observer might have noted how easily she reclined against the bench—how completely absorbed she seemed and yet how full of soft languor. The lieutenant's face was not so difficult to read; his eyes were full of passionate love—love so strongly shown that it was wonderful he restrained its fuller expression.

"Ma'mselle, you are wanted." Célestine stood before her with her hands, as usual, on her hips.

Françoise started and sat upright with a burning face and an uncomfortable sense of shame. She had told Célestine to. leave her in peace while she took her German lesson, and till to-day the old woman had been fairly obedient. She knew well that no one could thwart Françoise. Somehow or other ma'mselle would take her own way. So long as Célestine could keep her invisible she had watched and planned. Now it seemed to the bonne that interference might possibly convert a harmless intimacy into a love affair.

"It is Madame Viegron, mam'selle, and she is in the little salon behind the shop."

Françoise blushed yet more deeply.

"I must go, monsieur." She spoke hurriedly, and her eyes at last met Adolphe's.

Somehow he took her hand in his. Françoise forgot Madame Viegron, Célestine—everything. The clasp in which he held her hand was not so intense as that in which her soul seemed folded in his. She could not withdraw her eyes; they were fixed in a trance of loving union.

"Come, ma'mselle," Célestine went forward and touched her young lady's arm, "or shall I tell la tante you are here?"

Françoise found her aunt alone. Adèle and Victoire had been sent into the shop to talk to their uncle.

Madame Viegron's face was like a wooden doll, but the colour on her hard cheeks had the crimson hue of a June apple. Her little black eyes glittered like beads when she saw Françoise.

"Bon jour, ma nièce." She held herself so stiffly that Françoise had to stand on tiptoe to kiss her. "What is this I hear about thee? Is it true that, instead of shunning these Prussians, as it is the duty of every Frenchwoman to shun them, the officer here is allowed to see thee whenever he pleases? Is it then true that thou canst find pleasure in the society of an assassin?"

Françoise had grown crimson again, but she laughed at this word.

"Assassin! One soldier is not more of an assassin than another. Thou knowest, my aunt, I have never taken thine advice, and I shall not begin now. If thou only comest to speak ill of our visitor, I shall say au revoir." She got up and made a little mocking courtesy.

Madame Viegron also got up. She shook her head slowly.

"Thou art sadly wilful; but remember, whatever mischief comes from these proceedings, thou hast been warned, Françoise, solemnly warned, by thy nearest female relative."

Madame Viegron walked slowly into the shop.

"Come with me, my children," she said to her two stiff-looking daughters seated there; "there is not time for you to visit your cousin to-day."

"But, mille pardons, there is."

Madame Viegron looked aghast. There was the culprit, whom she had, as she thought, covered with shame and confusion, kissing Adèle on both cheeks, while she pinched the ear of Victoire.

"Come, my children," in a very severe voice. "I have no time for folly."

"I don't think thou hast time for anything else," Françoise said to herself, as her cousins followed their mother into the street.

But Françoise was too full of happy agitation to be really angry with her aunt; she only wanted to be alone to realize some of the delight which was dancing in her veins. Could it be possible that this was love? Or was she only living out some of the poems which had so thrilled her pulses while Adolphe read?

Adolphe! The blood came rushing up to her face; she should not see him again till to-morrow, and how should she get through the time? To-morrow—how would it be? Should they go back to the old way of reading as they had read yesterday?—ah! how far off was yesterday now!—or would it be that dreamy sweetness of to-day—a sweetness which had left behind it such wild unrest? Or would Adolphe—it was such a dear delight to say his name—would he speak of love to her as the verses spoke—as his eyes had spoken it? So she sat through the afternoon in a sweet dumb dream of coming happiness. Célestine came and went, and scolded and jested, but it was all one to Françoise—her whole soul was wrapped in the book that had awakened her to the knowledge of her love.

There came a sudden murmur—a murmur which swelled along from the farther end of the street. Françoise scarcely noticed it, but Célestine opened the window and looked out.

"Ma foi, ma'mselle, it is the Prussians! Some new ones coming in—no, it is these which depart. Ma'mselle, we shall then lose our lieutenant."

Françoise turned white and faint.

"Go and see," she said. "Come back and tell me as quickly as you can."

But Célestine did not come back. The time passed slowly. To Françoise it was as if it did not pass at all—as if the doubts and fears each moment brought stood crowding upon her heart.

She got up and threw open the window, but it only looked into the side street of which Monsieur Serret's house made the corner.

Only a far-off murmur of movement reached her. After a while this grew more distinct. A tramp of many feet came, more and more distinct, heavier and heavier, till it seemed as if the street pavement must sink under its weight. Tramp—tramp. They are gone at last; they have reached the end of the street, and the heavy sound grows faint, fainter still.

Françoise clings to the window; her eyes stare wildly; it seems to her that the floor on which she stands gives way. She has not even heard the door open, but instinct makes her turn round before Adolphe reaches her.

"My Françoise—my own beloved!"

She is in his arms, and her head on his

shoulder. He presses her tenderly to his heart. It is to Françoise as if she were at rest. All the dread fears and doubts are over. Adolphe loves her. He is for ever her own.

But this bliss cannot last.

"My beloved," he whispers, "I had not thus dared to speak, but that I must leave thee; my Françoise—my heart's treasure!" . . . . . After a too brief time he says—"I must indeed go. Adieu! my well-beloved."

She tries to speak, but he only hears "my Adolphe!" faintly whispered.

Again he kisses her passionately, and she feels tears on her cheeks, though her own eyes are dry.

III.

A MONTH passed by. The agony of sorrow that came to Françoise when she realized her lover's departure softened as she went over and over again every word, every look of that last meeting. Only one thought sometimes troubled this fond memory—why had Adolphe said he "would not have dared to speak had he not been going away"?

A smile came on the sweet, blushing face.

"It seems to me love must come to that in the end. I could never confess to Adolphe that I loved him unless I could hide my eyes and feel safe that he was my own."

She never fretted. Very soon her hope outgrew her sorrow. The war must end soon, and then Adolphe would be free. She would not let herself think of her cousin Gustave's fate. She told herself two such afflictions could not be sent to one person. It was impossible that she could lose her darling cousin, the sharer of all her joys and sorrows, and then that her love should also be taken away. Françoise shut her eyes to the sorrow and bereavement around her. She forgot that the widow Lebrun had seen six sons fall in battle since the fight at Woerth, and that her seventh, a lad even younger than Gustave, was now lying wounded in an ambulance.

There came a rumour that more Prussians were expected in the town—a larger number this time—and the inhabitants would be more severely taxed.

Monsieur Serret received notice that his house was large and his family small, and he must make room for at least three inmates.

The Lieutenant von Holst had conciliated both the master and the housekeeper, and Françoise had kept her secret so well that it seemed as if she only regretted the loss of her German lessons.

It was therefore a great shock to Célestine when her young mistress expressed dislike to the arrival of new invaders.

"Dame! and I told m'sieur you would be glad because of the reading."

"Is it likely I could be glad to see Prussians in Archon?—I, a French girl, who have suffered so deeply in this war?"

"Tiens!" Célestine stood, mop in hand. She was standing in the yard cleaning the back windows, by first throwing a cupful of water against a pane and then mopping it. "There are two things in which ma'mselle is quite changed: she is no longer so sad for the death of Monsieur Gustave, and she can bear to speak of it. I wonder what she will say when she finds that monsieur has arranged for the Prussians to dine every day in the salle? Well, I shall say nothing, or I may get a scolding."

Next day, when Françoise went into the salle at five o'clock, she found three Prussian officers talking with her father. She could hardly bear to look at them; it seemed to her that they were there in the place of Adolphe—that but for them he might be still with her.

They all turned as she entered, and gave her the stiff military salute. Her father introduced them by name:

"The Hauptmann Schleren, and the Lieutenants Welzenborg and Durnstein."

Françoise made three profound courtesies, but she scarcely smiled. It seemed to her that the hauptmann was a little, dark, ugly, sallow-faced man, and that the lieutenants were repetitions of each other: both had light hair, as harsh and colourless as stubble, and both had light, meaningless grey eyes. They could neither of them speak French, and Françoise would not let them see that she could help them with German.

The hauptmann and Monsieur Serret got through a stumbling conversation, but all the party seemed glad when dinner ended—only when left alone with their coffee and pipes the lieutenants agreed in praise of the fräulein's beauty.

Since Adolphe went away Françoise had often gone to sit on the bench under the lime tree. Sometimes she sat with closed eyes, acting over again, in spirit, those happy interviews; sometimes she would read over and over those verses which had most fascinated her—for early in their acquaintance Adolphe had given her the little book—and often she read nothing at all but the name on the first page, "Adolph von Holst: the gift of his mother."

"He must have loved me even then," the girl said to herself, proudly, "or he could not have given me a gift from his mother."

It seemed to her now, strange that she had never asked him about his family or his home—all their talk had been of Love and Goethe.

On the morning after the arrival of the officers Françoise stayed in her room. "Célestine"—she spoke to the old woman while she made the bed, with its pretty white hangings and tufted fringe—"you can tell me as soon as the Prussians go out. I do not want to run the risk of seeing them."

"Bien, ma'mselle." Célestine smiled, but she kept her broad red lips firmly closed. "What ails the child?" she said to herself. "She used always to know her own mind. But, dame! who knows? It is possible she will be dear friends with these officers to-morrow; she was much fiercer against our lieutenant at the beginning."

For the first time in her life Célestine felt dissatisfied with her young lady. She obeyed her orders, however, and as soon as the officers left the house Françoise came down the green staircase and sat under the lime tree.

"If either of them come in you can easily warn me in time, Célestine."

But while the housekeeper was intent on the concoction of a new dish the hauptmann came back. Françoise saw him, and made a hasty retreat. When Célestine reached the yard, the hauptmann was coming from the lime tree reading a book. Célestine's quick eyes recognized the book in an instant.

"The marauding vagabond!" she muttered. "It is then true that they pick and steal all they can lay their hands on. Pardon, monsieur"—she placed herself just in front of the hauptmann, with her feet very wide apart and her hands on her hips—"but that is the book of my young lady." She held out her broad brown hand.

The hauptmann put his head a little on one side, and held the book fast. He looked slyly through his small dark eyes at the angry face before him.

"Pardon," he said; "but it is not the name of your young lady which I read here. It is 'Adolph von Holst,' and I know this gentleman."

They were both too much interested to hear a movement in the gallery just above them, and then a sigh.

"I am his cousin," said the hauptmann. "It is quite simple; he has been probably here, and has left his book." And then he bowed and would have passed by Célestine.

"But I tell you it is not so! It is the favourite book of ma'mselle. She will be——" She turned desperately toward the outside staircase, as if she would call Françoise to confirm her words. "Tiens, la voilà!" She caught sight of Françoise moving along the gallery. "Ma'mselle, will you come down and tell this unbelieving gentleman that we have not stolen the book?"

Françoise was in the yard before Célestine ended, her eyes sparkling, her lips quivering with excitement.

"Indeed it is my book, monsieur." She spoke very gently; her heart beat so fast with the terror of losing this dearly-prized treasure that she could scarcely get the words out. "The Lieutenant von Holst was so kind as to give it to me when he was here."

"He was here, was he?" The hauptmann gave Françoise a long keen look, but her eyes drooped under it. She felt that her cheeks grew crimson; she could hardly keep in her tears. How dared this rude man so look at her?

"My book, monsieur, if you please."

"Mille pardons, mademoiselle!" It seemed to Célestine that the hauptmann spoke better French than he had at first seemed capable of. "You must forgive my rudeness, but I did not think my cousin would have parted with his mother's gift, except to one person."

Françoise became suddenly pale. Célestine listened too eagerly to notice the change in her young lady.

"Who is the one person?" The girl's voice was unsteady, as if there were a sob in it.

"His wife. He is the betrothed of my sister. They had to part on the eve of the marriage-day; but the war cannot last for ever, and then Adolph and Lieschen will be happy."

An instinct had kept his eyes from her face, but he held out the book.

"Hé! mon Dieu! Ah, scélérat! you have killed her!" Françoise had fallen on the stones at his feet.

"She has fainted, that is all." The hauptmann raised her. She felt like lead in his arms. "Some water, quick!" he said, in a tone of command to the terrified bonne. "I tell you she has fainted."

Célestine went, and her cries summoned Monsieur Serret. But no water, no earthly aid, could ever more awaken Françoise. That little phrase—so short, so quickly spoken—had been as deadly as a sword-thrust through her heart. Adolphe was her life, her hope; if he was another's then life and hope were over for the fond, gentle girl.

The hauptmann went back to the yard after he had helped the sorrowing father and nurse with their burden.

The little book lay just where Françoise had fallen.

"Shall I take it to Adolph," said the Prussian, "and tell him what it did? or shall I leave him to make Lieschen believe he has been faithful, and, perhaps, break her heart for the next face he fancies? Goethe, my fine fellow"—he put the book in his pocket—"I wonder how many hearts you have helped to break?"

THE MOTHER OF JACQUES.

THE MOTHER OF JACQUES.

I.

THE village of Trochu is at some distance from Bordeaux. It is a sandy district, where there is little cultivation of anything but vines, and these, strangely enough, flourish best where the soil looks most unpromising. Much of the ground runs to waste, and is fertile only in long stretches of furze and heather, backed by clumps of pines.

Just in front of one of these wastes, about half-way between Bordeaux and Trochu, a small cottage stands on the high road; a loosely-piled stone fence surrounds the garden —a mere strip in front, but wider at the side, where it slopes downward, and shows a stunted-looking vineyard. Beyond this is a wood of fir trees.

Some cabbages grow in the narrow strip, and at the side is a herb garden backed by a stack of fagots. The resinous fragrance that comes from this mingles agreeably with the scent of basil and savory in the plot beside it, and seems to make the humming crowd of bees that hover over this last, a necessity, a something that the eye would naturally seek. There are vines clinging to all sides of the red-tiled cottage, and on those which grow at the back, fishing nets are spread out to dry.

It is the month of July, 1870, but there is that strange stillness of atmosphere which seems to belong to a later time of year. Even the bees move lazily. They, and a cloud of gnats buzzing round the head of a donkey just within the door at the back of the cottage, make the only sound in the silence of the place. The gnats become too much even for the donkey's patience. He flaps his capped ears, and his tormenters wheel round in a larger circle, ready to begin a fresh attack.

"Go on there, Bobot," says a cheery voice, and Bobot comes forward. He shakes himself and his gaily-fringed net, by way of keeping off the trumpeting crowd, which till now has only attacked his head. Bobot might make a dash to the small shed just opposite the fagot stack, and take refuge under the shadow of its tiled roof; but Bobot is a donkey of patience and discretion—he knows his office and its duties, and he places himself in the full sunshine a little way from the back door.

Out of the cottage comes the owner of the cheery voice. She has a cheery face, too, though it must be more than sixty years old, and is wrinkled and brown as a walnut; but her dark eyes are full of light as they glance up under the yellow handkerchief which shades her head; the handkerchief hides even her cap, except its pair of starched white strings tied in two bows under the chin. She wears a black jacket and a lilac skirt, and between this last and her sabots are leathern gaiters. She brings out first one brown pannier and then another, and fastens them on the patient Bobot. While she stoops and fastens the last, a figure comes out from the stunted vineyard. It is that of a tall youth about nineteen years old. As he comes up to the donkey you see what a handsome beardless face he has—one of those faces not easily forgotten, it is so full of strength and sweetness.

"My mother"—he puts a strong brown hand on each of her shoulders—"why not wait for me? Wilt thou never spare thyself?"

She looks up at him with proud delight, but shakes her head rebukingly.

"Listen to him then, my Bobot. Is it not enough to make thee believe, innocent ass that thou art, that the mother is decrepit and useless, and that he, Jacques, who was but now the babe of the house, is to do all the work? Is it not a presumptuous Jacques, my Bobot, to fancy that he can fix thy panniers as the mother fixes them?"

Jacques bends down and kisses her forehead.

"The mother is not to tell Bobot any more stories," he laughs in a bright, saucy way, "but she is to give place while Jacques fills the panniers. It is time we were off, friend Bobot. I expect there will be news to-day from the army."

The donkey understands. He flaps his ears impatiently and takes a step forward.

"Hola, Bobot! but thou art of a restlessness——"

The mother of Jacques breaks off her sentence with a conciliatory pat, and, considering how the gnats are singing in his ears and nostrils, Bobot's patience may be considered exemplary. He stands very still while the panniers are filled with cabbages, beans, and herbs and covered with heather. Jacques is not allowed to fill these unaided. His mother trots backward and forward, helping, and praising, and laughing, and finally she pats Bobot and then stands on tiptoe to receive the parting kiss of her much-beloved son. He leads Bobot on round the cottage, out at the little gate in the stone fence. He stops here and kisses his hand to his mother, and then goes quickly along the sandy road that leads to Trochu.

The mother of Jacques has not followed him to the gate. Her son will look back for her when he reaches the cross-road, and she can only command this point by standing on a little mound which Jacques has made for her beside the plot of herbs. She mounts this and stands waiting patiently; one brown hand with its wedding-ring finger shades her eyes, and the other is doubled into her waist by way of support. She has to stand some minutes, for the line of yellow sand is longer to traverse than to look at, and she chatters to herself about her boy:

"My Jacques! and how good he is to his mother! He takes no care but for her; and at his age he is so fine, so handsome a youth, it would not be wonderful if he was to think more of the pretty girls of Trochu than of his silly old mother. There is Françoise Chenet; she thinks no one sees, poor child, but I can see, how, as we come from mass, her eyes follow after my Jacques as he gives me his arm to lean on. A mother's eyes cannot be hoodwinked. Well, well, she is a good girl—not so pretty as some, but she likes work better than fine clothes, and she will be happier than Victoire and the rest. Ma foi! it might have been that my Jacques was taken with the bold, black eyes of Victoire. Then indeed I should have cause for sorrow, for the head of Victoire is filled with thinking of the ducasse and fine clothes. She will never be a housewife. Ah, there never was a mother so blessed as I am!"

At this point the old Eugénie—her name is Eugénie Duclos—spies out her Jacques and Bobot at the cross-road. They wait just an instant. Jacques waves his cap in the air, and then the road turns suddenly, and they are out of sight.

La mère Duclos comes down from the mound much more quickly than you might expect from her stooping figure. She gathers a few herbs for the pot-au-feu, and goes into the house with them. There is not much to be done there. Eugénie Duclos rises early, and the cabbage is already shredded and in the soup-pot, and cabbage soup and fish, or sometimes a little bouilli and a long loaf of dark-coloured bread, make up the daily fare of the cottage. There will not be any fish to-day, for Jacques has not been out these last nights, unless, indeed, he exchanges some of his cabbage with his friend Pierre the fisherman.

But the old woman has plenty to do; there are many broken loops in the net that is drying on the vine branches, and if there were not these there would be stockings to knit for Jacques, or fresh wood to add to the faggot stack from among the fir trees that make such a dark background to the stunted vineyard.

The hours pass away. Jacques is usually home again between three and four o'clock, but the lengthening shadows tell his mother that her son is two hours late.

"Ma foi, Eugénie! what is the matter with thee?" She looks anxious a moment, and then a smile brightens the wrinkled old face. "Foolish old woman that thou art. Is not then thy Jacques to make an acquaintance as his brothers did, and smoke a pipe with a friend, and chat with a girl on his way home?" She sighs a little and looks sad, for the word "brothers" has conjured up a row of stalwart, well-grown men, who have been taken from their home one by one to serve in the army of the empire. But these were all much older than Jacques, and all are gone now—gone to the old father laid to sleep in the cemetery of Trochu.

A sudden tear rolls over the brown cheek and falls on the twine with which she is threading her netting needle.

"It is not for the boys themselves," she says hastily, and then she brushes the bright drop away with her sharp knuckles; "they have gone to the good God; but sometimes I feel it very hard that I do not know where so much as one of them lies. For my man it is different: every Sunday and every fête day I can go and pray beside his grave, and keep the cross painted and the immortelles fresh;

but I can never go to Italy or to Algeria—I can never pray beside my darlings, and it is possible that no one else has prayed at their graves. Ah, but it is a great blessing that my Jacques has not been taken for this new war. Monsieur le Curé has said they do not take the only son of a widow."

It was not the habit of Eugénie Duclos to indulge herself in regrets, so she got up, and, to shake off her unusual depression, began to get supper ready.

Jacques must come in soon now; and yet, though each moment she expects to hear the tinkle of Bobot's bells, the old woman's heart does not lighten. She bustles about, and when the table is spread she puts Bobot's supper of coarse grass ready for him under the shed.

The light has grown level, and shows in dusky lines of red behind the pine wood; the straight stems and branches of the trees panel it into spaces. It is dusk in front of the cottage when Eugénie once more climbs up on her watch-tower.

She strains her eyes toward Trochu, but no one is in sight. "No one," she sighs. "Something has happened; Jacques was never late like this." Just then there comes the sudden faint tinkle she had been listening for.

The self-restraint in which she has kept herself gives way. She opens the little gate and hurries along the sandy road.

Her heart gives a great jump at the sight of Jacques. There is light enough to see that his head is drooping instead of being held erect. When his mother comes close up to him she sees that he looks very sad.

Mechanically she takes hold of Bobot's bridle and leads him toward the cottage at a brisker pace, but Jacques does not walk beside her.

"Comment ça va, ma mère!" he says in answer to her greeting, and then he shrinks back and in a few minutes is almost hidden in the increasing darkness.

"Mon Dieu!" — Eugénie's heart grows heavier still—"what has happened? It must be a grievous trouble which has come to my poor boy, if he will not tell it to his mother."

She goes on musing. Can it be that Jacques cares for Françoise, as Eugénie can see Françoise cares for him, and that Jacques has discovered some obstacle in the way of his happiness?

"But that is not to be thought of," she says, as she leads Bobot carefully into the garden. "To begin with, Jacques is too young—he would not speak yet; and Françoise has only her old grandmother, and the old woman owes the girl too much to stand between her and my Jacques. No one could say 'No' to Jacques; it is not love that is troubling my boy."

Her housewifely instincts quiet her anxiety. She takes Bobot to his shed, and then lights a little thin candle in a wooden candlestick and puts it on the round table which she has got ready for supper. Two wooden bowls and spoons, two horn mugs, and a narrow roll of bread about three feet long, make the rest of her preparations.

In turn she takes each bowl to the stove, fills each from the soup-pot, and sets both on the table to cool. She has already brought in a dark red pitcher of water and placed it in the corner farthest from the stove, but now she goes to a little cupboard in one corner of the room and brings out a black bottle.

"My good man used to say that good wine was sent us to cheer the heavy-hearted, not to make giddy those who are already joyful; my Jacques will eat his potage and drink some wine, and then he will tell me what is grieving him."

But though Jacques comes in and sits down at the table, he seems unable to eat. All at once he notices the wine bottle, and he half fills his horn cup and drinks off the liquor greedily.

"Ma foi! But, Jacques, eat then at least a bit of bread; the good wine flies upward if there is nothing to keep it down."

Jacques does not smile; his lips are so firmly closed that he looks almost surly; his answer is to put his hand on the bottle and pour out yet another draught.

This time Eugénie keeps silence; her anxiety has changed to alarm. She and her son are so very poor that of late good wine has been to them a rare luxury, instead of the every-day drink that it is in some southern districts. What can have happened?

He sits upright a few moments, the sternness deepening round his mouth, then comes a painful quivering at the corners; suddenly his head droops, he clasps his hands quickly over his face and rests his elbows on the table.

His mother is alarmed; she gets up, puts her arms around his neck and kisses the strong brown hands that cover his face. They are wet with tears, and as her arm circles round him as only a mother's arm can circle, a great shuddering sob shakes him from head to foot.

"My darling, my good child, tell thy mother what it is, then—who is it, then, my Jacques, who has so grieved thee?"

Just the same caress, almost the same words she would have said to her boy ten years ago. She draws his head to her till it rests on her shoulder, but she asks no further questions. "My brave Jacques! my good boy!" and then she kisses him and waits till the full heart can speak in words.

The struggle is soon over; Jacques pounds his knuckles into his eyes and looks ashamed, yet smiling.

"It is not for myself I am grieved, my mother; it is for thee. There is a levy of fresh troops, and—and I am taken, my mother."

It is very sad to see the sudden paleness of the cheery old face—to see the light fade from those dark bright eyes so widely opened on her son. Jacques sits an instant, spelled by the change in his mother's face, then rises up and places her in the chair in which he has been sitting. He feels that she is trembling and her hands are quite cold.

"Do not be cast down, my mother; all will go will. It is like this: thou knowest we have heard that the empire has been insulted by these Prussians, and that our Emperor will avenge the insult and carry fire and sword to the homes of these invaders. This is well, and no doubt it will be done; but what then, my mother? Meantime these Prussian brigands have terrible guns, and mow down our brave hearts like grass. It is no longer possible to make exemptions. I have spoken to M. le Maire; he came up just as my name was being taken, but he only sighed and looked sorry. 'Make the best of it, Jacques,' he said."

Jacques pauses here, but his mother does not speak. She makes no complaint; she only sits still, her eyes fixed on her son's bowed face, as if she would learn it off by heart, so that she may know him again in heaven. Her heart was very heavy, she could not summon a ray of hope. Had she not seen four sons depart on the same errand, and not one had come back?

"Courage, my mother"—Jacques spoke out quickly and gaily, as if he were resolved to rouse her from her abstraction—"thou must not grieve for me. It is only because I think the winter will come before I am here again, and that there will be no one to dig or to fetch wood and water for thee, that I lament; and this too is wrong. We have not sought this, my mother; it is sent to us; and hast thou not always told me that, if we bear the crosses sent to us willingly, they are not so hard to bear?"

He bends down and kisses her, and then she gives way. She hides her face on the shoulder of her darling and sobs and cries bitterly; but when this is over she dries her eyes and tries to look cheerfully in his face.

"It is I who am a selfish old woman," she says. "What do I know, my Jacques? Thou wilt come back to me, perhaps, a corporal—who can say?—for thou art brave, my boy, and thou wilt make a good soldier. Allons! I must think of thy linen. How soon?" Here she breaks off abruptly and turns away.

"In two days, my mother," says Jacques simply; but he is glad that she goes away and leaves him; he feels that they are only prolonging a common misery by this show of courage towards each other.

They kiss each other much as usual when they say good-night, but Eugénie cannot sleep. She is up with the sun—and it rises early—and after she has set her son's breakfast she trudges off to the little church just this side of Trochu, the church of Notre Dame de la Grâce. But for the altar lights the church would be in darkness; there are only a few other worshippers, and when mass is said it seems to Eugénie that one of these is lingering, as she herself is, to speak to Monsieur le Curé.

Eugénie goes out of the church and stands waiting in the road. The sky is overcast, and the cool grey haze seems in keeping with the intense stillness. It is a bare, treeless spot, and not even the chirp of a bird or the whirr of an insect breaks the quiet. There comes a footstep, and Eugénie starts and recognizes a girl with a lilac kerchief drawn forward over her cap.

"Ma foi, Françoise! Who would have thought of seeing you so far from home at this hour, and it is neither Sunday nor a fête day? Hast thou also a trouble at thy heart?"

La mère Duclos looks searchingly for an instant, but then the downcast blushing face answers all questions. When Monsieur le Curé comes out of the sacristy he finds Eugénie kissing Françoise as if she were her own child.

The good priest walked part of the way home with Eugénie, and then she went in alone and spent this last sorrowful day with her son.

They had not many words for each other; now and then Jacques, as he passed where she sat stitching, stooped down and kissed his mother. In the afternoon he had to go to Trochu, and this absence was almost a relief; for the brave old woman struggled hard to keep from tears, and the very sight of the loved face made her eyes swim as she bent over her work.

Then came the sad good-night, and at last the dreaded moment of parting. It had been so long in coming through those hours of suppressed sorrow, and yet now it seemed to Eugénie that the day had made a bound from morning to afternoon. All was ready — Jacques and his bundle; his mother too was ready to go with him; only Bobot was left behind.

The men were all to be marched to the nearest railway station, their destination being Orleans; but Jacques had got his mother to promise she would leave him before he fairly started.

"What use," he said, "to stand and be pushed aside in a crowd, and yet not to be able, perhaps, to see me?"

Eugénie cannot thwart his slightest wish. They are close to Trochu now, and Jacques stops.

"Good-bye, my mother! God bless thee and the Holy Virgin!" He takes her in his arms, almost lifting her off the ground, and she feels the sobs he cannot keep back now.

"God bless thee, my Jacques!" and it is over. He hurries away so fast that when he turns back to kiss his hand the small bent figure seems quite far off as it stands gazing after him.

II.

It is a hot afternoon in the hot August of 1870. The voiture which runs three times a week between the town of D—— and the village of O—— has been ready to start for an hour; but as no passengers have appeared, the said voiture—a cross between an old-fashioned diligence and a modern omnibus—is disinclined to start empty. The horses stamp and shake their rope harness; the driver stands just within the entrance of the Hôtel de l'Univers smoking his pipe; while the conducteur chats and smiles with Mdlle. Sophie, the fille de boutique at the confectioner's in the street over the way. The street itself is narrow and the houses are high; there is, therefore, shadow in it, but this shadow brings out the glare of the little open Place yet more strongly; for though the Hôtel de l'Univers is the smallest inn in D——, it has a Place of its own, and the voiture stands thereon.

The driver stands in shadow, but he feels for his horses; the poor animals' tails are tied up with scarlet, and they can only stamp when the flies give a sharper bite than usual; the last stamp has been so vigorous that it has nearly upset the voiture.

"Diable!"—the driver takes his pipe out of his mouth—"it cannot well be hotter, and it is not yet midday."

The Place de l'Univers is a triangle; the shady street is at its apex, and at each of the other angles is an opening, both leading away into the country and both with houses only on one side. Down the steepest of these two roads comes a moving object towards the place. It is hard to say at first what it is; it may be a man or a woman; or it may be a small cow. It is dark-looking, and if it moves on two legs it is bent double, it seems to roll forward like a ball.

"Diable!" the driver says again. It is perhaps a favourite expression, or it may be he is too hot to seek another.

"Joseph!" The conducteur nods to Mdlle. Sophie, and comes forward at the summons of his chief, for the driver is also the proprietor of the voiture. "Look out, vagabond that thou art, and tell what this is that comes along the road from Merly."

"That"—Joseph gasps as he comes into the blaze of sunshine, and wipes his big brown face with a red handkerchief—"that is an old woman. Hast thou never seen one before, my friend?"

The driver looks sulky; he puts his broad hand up to screen his eyes and takes a long look at the strangely moving object.

"Ma foi, it is then a woman who has the nature of a crab; she walks with one side only."

"When does this voiture start for O——?" says a voice.

The driver starts and takes off his straw hat to an unmistakable Englishman; he has spoken those few words with very little accent, it is true, but then there is no mistaking the English aspect of his face, his figure, and the baggage which a gamin is wheeling up in a barrow from the shady street opposite.

"Immediately, m'sieur—at the service of m'sieur." Here the driver pulls off his hat again.

The Englishman is a pleasant-looking man about thirty years old, with a massive and yet high forehead, a severe straight nose, and earnest deep-set blue eyes; it does not signify about the shape of the mouth when one wears such a long tawny beard as this Mr. Martin does. For his name is Martin—Martin on his portmanteau, Martin on his writing-box, and Martin on another clamped box so heavy that it surely holds either books or plate.

He stands and sees his baggage disposed of with quiet determination; he does not worry or fidget, but he checks the reckless handling of the gamin and the leisurely dawdling of the conducteur.

The driver meantime gives a last look to his horses, and then before he mounts his high perch he glances up the road to see what has become of the old woman. Behold her! very red in face—as much face as can be seen under a yellow kerchief—panting and gasping for breath, but with a cheery smile of gladness round her parted lips, courtesying close beside him.

"Diable! but you startled me. What is it, *then,* my mother?"

It is as the driver has said; the old woman moves her right side nearer to him, and draws the other side after it with an effort.

"Bonjour, m'sieur. You go to O——, is it not so?"

"But yes, my mother, the letters are painted large enough." He points to the inscription in flaming scarlet letters on the black body of the voiture.

"M'sieur, I am the mother of Jacques, our Jacques—who has been badly wounded in the last battle. What do I know? there has been perhaps another battle since. I have travelled for four days, m'sieur, from Trochu, for I have no money to spend on voitures; but I have this, m'sieur, if it will pay for my journey to O——." She holds up a half-franc piece. The driver scratches his head.

"One franc for the intérieur, a franc and a half for the coupé, ma mère." Here he pauses and looks at the bent mother of Jacques; she looks up at him. Her face is still red. The blaze on it has been scorched thereon by miles of toil along the barren high road. She cannot turn pale. She does not cry or sob, but a sudden droop spreads over the whole countenance; the cheery life that lay sparkling in those dark old eyes has departed.

The Englishman listens attentively. Being a man, he listens to the end.

"But, my good mother," says the driver, "you may not think it to look at me, but I too have a son fighting those accursed Prussians, and for my son's sake you shall ride part of the way to O——."

As he speaks he opens the door of the intérieur.

"Cocher," the Englishman touches him on the shoulder, "I take the coupé for myself, and this good woman can travel with me. I prefer her company."

This last in answer to a shrug of deprecation from the driver.

The conducteur opens the door of the coupé. The Englishman takes off his hat to the courtesying old woman, and waits till she takes her place. Then he gets in; the driver mounts the box. The conducteur waves his hand toward the shop-window of Mdlle. Sophie. The voiture lurches, creaks, and with much noise of rattling over the round stones of the Place, and an occasional crack of the driver's whip mingling with his sharp adjurations to his horses, the vehicle moves off along the second of the two country roads.

"Has your son been long in the army?" The Englishman has settled himself comfortably in his corner, and there is plenty of room for the mother of Jacques to follow his example, but she sits on the edge of the cushioned seat as if she were unused to luxuries. It may be that her heart is too full to be able to think of comfort, or aught relating to self.

She turns round and looks at her questioner; her eyes glisten while she speaks: "But no, m'sieur, he is my youngest, and he has said—my Jacques did—that he will never leave his mother. But what will you? They have taken him; he was all I had to give, and when this war came it was not likely he would be passed over. He is a fine boy, m'sieur, is my Jacques; ah, and so were the others!" She sighed and broke off abruptly.

"Have you other children?" There is a patient sweetness in the wrinkled face, such a mingling of sorrow and hope in the glistening dark eyes, that the Englishman is stirred out of his usual indifference to fellow travellers.

"I am the mother of five, m'sieur, but the others were much, much older than Jacques. They were all taken for soldiers. Two of them died at Magenta, and two in Algeria, and now my Jacques too is wounded."

"And you are on your way to nurse him? Have you come from a long distance?"

"From Trochu, m'sieur. It is some miles from Bordeaux. If I could have gone by the railroad it would not have taken so long. As it is, I have been four days."

"But, madame, you cannot have walked all that immense distance; and you are lame, too!"

"Pardon, m'sieur, but I have walked the most of it, except when I have gone a little way in a charrette. Consider, m'sieur—how else could I get to Jacques? I have a little money, it is true—see here, m'sieur." She unfastens the handkerchief which is tied over her cap and shows the end of the stocking head-gear knotted below the tassel. "But I carry that to my Jacques. He cannot walk, the poor boy, and I must take him home with me to Trochu as soon as he can leave the ambulance. And, m'sieur, with the pardon of m'sieur, I am not lame. I have grown bent with the pain of my foot; my feet are sore and blistered, and a stone has got into my sabot and has cut my left foot. It is for that reason, m'sieur, that I am so glad to find a voiture which goes to O——. I shall tell Jacques of the bounty of m'sieur, and we will both pray for him, and that he may not be wounded in battle."

The Englishman is silent. He thinks of the intense heat of these last four days, and of the sandy, flinty roads that lie between O—— and Trochu, for he is a traveller; and then he looks at the frail, bent form beside him, so spare and fleshless, and yet with such small bones that they scarcely show under the wrinkled skin.

"But I suppose Jacques would have come to you as soon as he was strong enough?"

The withered lips are pressed tightly together, but they quiver nevertheless. She keeps her eye stedfastly fixed on the Englishman.

"It may be that he will never be again strong; that is in the hands of the good God; but he will be happier for the sight of his mother. Ah, m'sieur, you do not know the loving heart of my Jacques."

She turned her face away abruptly, and then came a little choking sob. It was not as if she were ashamed of her sorrow, but she would not obtrude it on her companion. He left her in peace. He thought if she cried herself to sleep it would do her good; and she did sleep peacefully.

Just at two o'clock the voiture halted. It had halted before, but not with so violent a jerk. The old woman started, awoke, and the Englishman, who had dozed off for a few minutes, yawned, and shook himself. The conducteur came to the door of the coupé.

"We are near O——, m'sieur. Where does m'sieur wish to be set down?"

"At the hospital."

"Bien, m'sieur!"

In a few minutes they were rolling again along the high road.

"When you get to the hospital, madame, how shall you find your son?" The Englishman had been in similar scenes, and he foresaw that a crowd of wounded and dying men lay at O——.

"Pardon, m'sieur, but I have the number of my Jacques. He is number seven. And also I have the chaplain's letter. I am to ask for M'sieur Saxe, the chaplain, and he will conduct me to my Jacques."

Again her eyes glisten with that wonderful blending of hope and sorrow.

Hitherto the roadway has gone across open country, unscathed as yet by the tread of war; only the untilled fields and the absence of crops speak of the universal desolation that broods over France. But close to O—— everything changes; blackened houses in ruins, others riddled with balls, and windowless, are to be seen on all sides as the voiture draws up within a short distance of the hospital. The Englishman helps his companion out of the voiture very carefully.

"My visit here," he says, "is to Dr. Laborde, the head of the medical staff. If I can be of any assistance to you, you will find me at his quarters."

The glistening eyes twinkle, but it is an effort to hold back the tears which run freely over her withered, scorched cheeks.

"M'sieur," she says in a quivering voice, "I cannot thank you enough, but if you will come to see my Jacques we will thank you together."

The Englishman is going to answer her, but his hand is grasped suddenly by some one who has come out of the hospital.

"Ma foi, Martin, I did not look for you so soon; are you really come to help us?"

"I am come to do what I can. I have no medical skill, but I am a tolerable nurse. But, Laborde, this good woman has a son badly wounded; she is anxious to see him." Then in a lower voice the Englishman told the story of her weary journey and of her letter from the chaplain.

Monsieur Laborde answered at once, but he spoke to the old woman instead of to his friend.

"Madame, your son is in excellent hands. Monsieur Saxe is as good a doctor as he is a priest. I will take you to him at once."

She made a deep courtesy, and once more hope returned to her dark eyes. There was an indescribable expression of thankful resignation in her face, and in the thin brown hands which she folded one over the other as she followed the doctor to the entrance of the long, low building. Dr. Laborde spoke to a woman dressed like a Sister and pointed to the mother of Jacques. The Sister shook her head.

"The Père Saxe is not to be seen just now," she said. "He is burying a poor boy who died last night."

"Then you will wait till he returns," said Dr. Laborde. "Come, Martin, I will take you round at once."

The rapidity, the keenness of decision in the dark-eyed doctor has imposed silence on his companions. Mr. Martin nods at the old woman and follows into the hospital. The Sister stands looking at the mother of Jacques. The Sœur Ursule has a broad, good-natured face, and looks pitifully at the weary woman.

"Ma Sœur, is it far to the cemetery?"

The Sister's eyes open widely. "On the contrary, it is too near; but you will not see our good father any sooner for seeking him there. Will you not be glad to rest till Monsieur Saxe comes in? You are surely very weary; I will take you where you can repose yourself."

"I thank you, ma Sœur, but I too would like to pray for the soul of the poor boy who died last night. I have lost four boys in battles, and it may be that good souls have also prayed at their lonely graves."

"Bien, my mother, as you will." The Sister points out the way to the cemetery, and then hastens back to her duties.

But the mother of Jacques finds that she has more power in intention than in execution. While she sat resting on the cushion of the voiture, wondering at its softness, her back and her legs have stiffened; she can scarcely move along the way the Sister pointed out. A desolate way enough, with ruined cottages on each side, till they give place to what has been a stone fence scattered in heaps beside the road. There is no living sight or sound except a crowd of gnats which trumpet forth a joy-song at the approach of a victim. They buzz about the old woman's head, they settle on her face and hands, but she does not notice them. Another murmur, lower than that of the gnats, has reached her, and she turns into an open space on the right between the heaps of grey stones. This has been a field once, but the grass has been trodden away. There are already several earth mounds rising about its brown surface. A priest and his attendants stand beside an open grave, and near are several men who have already lowered the body. The service is nearly ended. The priest takes the aspersory from his assistant, walks round the grave and sprinkles the coffin for the last time, and then he chants the versicles while the assistants make the responses. Then all kneel while the priest offers the last prayer, and the mother of Jacques, spite of her stiffness, kneels reverently with the rest and prays earnestly that the departed one "may be associated with the choirs of angels." The church has been destroyed by the Prussians, so the *De Profundis* is said at the grave itself. The priest and assistants depart. The bystanders have noticed the deep reverence and earnestness of the stranger's prayers, and two of them, as they go back along the road, speak of her one to another:

"She is a parent or some friend, but it is strange she was not there at the beginning."

His companion turns round and sees the old woman following them. Le Père Saxe is some way on ahead, but she will not venture to address herself to him until he has put off his surplice.

"Ma mère," says one of the men kindly, "is it any one belonging to you that we have been laying there?"

"But no. I thank you, my friend, for your kind thought. I am a stranger just arrived from Trochu, and I thought I would pray for the departed one, that is all. Au revoir, my good friend."

She nods and falls into the rear. Her poor stiff knees tremble, but still the gladness is in her eyes. Soon, very soon now, she shall reach the hospital and be with her Jacques.

"They can nurse him better than I can, it is true," she says, dragging one weary foot after its fellow, and panting in the treeless road, "but my Jacques will love dearly to see me; the sight of his mother will do him good. He loves his mother and tries to comfort her, does my Jacques."

Her kind friend, Mr. Martin, stands at the door as she goes in. She makes him a deep courtesy.

"Poor man! how ill he looks. And yet he has not had nearly so long a journey as I have. Ah! it is as the good curé says, the back is always made for the burden."

Mr. Martin had come out to breathe the air and refresh his mind from the terrible sights and suffering he had been witnessing—suffering which only insensibility could alleviate, which only death could cure. He shuddered, as he leaned against the open doorway, in thinking of the mere physical pain that was being endured over almost the whole of France. "And this is not all; there is mental agony still greater in the desolate homes, widowed mothers and their little ones. That poor creature now"—he smiled as she courtesied—"how will she find her son? Perhaps suffering the tortures of those poor fellows I have just left; perhaps more mercifully dying; and yet how hard for her to have taken that long, devoted journey just to see him die!"

Meanwhile the old woman waited patiently in the small boarded space which served as entrance. Presently the man who had spoken to her on the road came close up to where she stood.

"Well, my mother," he said, "what are you looking for?"

"Pardon, but I have a letter here from m'sieur the chaplain, and he tells me to ask for him and he will take me to the person I am come to see."

"In good time, my mother; then you will do well to come with me. I am going to find the father himself."

He opened a door in the wooden partition and held it while she passed into the hospital. The patients lay on straw on one side of the long, narrow shed, some with coverlets over them, but the greater number had tossed these off in their feverish movements. Some had bandaged legs or arms or heads; and in some faces, where there was no apparent injury, the expression of agony was terrible. The mother of Jacques was full of the thought of her son, but she could not pass unmoved by this line of haggard sufferers.

"Poor man! poor boy!" she murmured; and once or twice she bent down and strove to place the coverlet over a sufferer who had thrown it off in his restless struggles.

Her conductor opened a door at the end, and she found herself in the open air again, facing another of the long, low sheds.

Dr. Laborde stood here. He was speaking eagerly to a priest. He only wore his cassock now, but the old woman recognized the Père Saxe. Her conductor stood waiting, but Dr. Laborde had heard their approach, and he looked up quickly.

"But yes, father," he said to the priest, "here is a good woman who came from O—— this morning. You have charge of her son, it seems. Will you take her to him?"

Her heart throbbed fast. Till now her quiet faith had kept her calm, but the nearness of coming joy was harder to bear in patience than the long suspense had been. Père Saxe looked very kindly at her. "I have already seen you this morning."

She courtesied, but her knees trembled.

"Can you tell me your son's number? I fear we have but few names in this ward."

He opens the door. The ward is lighter and more cheerful looking than that through which she has passed. There are fewer patients, and their beds look more comfortable. The bed nearest the door is empty.

"Will you tell me the number?" repeats the priest.

"Number seven, at your service, mon père."

The Sister is at the further end of the room, and Dr. Laborde has gone on to look at her patients. She comes up quickly to Père Saxe while the old woman speaks; then she too speaks and looks to the other end of the room.

"Follow me," says Monsieur Saxe.

The mother of Jacques gives a straining, wistful look at every face as she passes, but she sees no one like her handsome boy. The men who lie here are all bearded, and look as if they had served in many campaigns, though their faces are so pale and bloodless. Père Saxe halts before a bed and looks round for her, but she does not hurry forward as he expects. It is a youth, it is true, who lies there, but it is not her son. She shakes her head.

"This is not, then, number seven?" the priest says to the Sister.

"No, my father, this is number seventeen; number seven——" The Sister does not end her sentence in words. The cheerful smile fades from her broad face and leaves a look of sad sympathy as she glances on to the empty bed next the doorway. Le Père Saxe looks sad too, but he hopes to save the mother of Jacques from thus suddenly learning the truth.

"Come with me, my good mother," he says, and he leads the way out of the ward.

The mother of Jacques does not speak. She looks from the face of the Sister to that of the priest, and she learns all that they are mercifully trying to withhold from her. She does not cry out or sink down under the shock. Very quietly she follows the priest till he reaches the foot of the empty bed by the door, and there she kneels down. She clasps her wrinkled hands over her face, but there is no sobbing burst of grief. Only the Père, as he stands pityingly beside her, sees tears trickle through the trembling fingers. He bends down and whispers, "He was so patient and good, your Jacques; and you prayed for him this morning. His last wish was that you should know where he lay, and God in His mercy guided you Himself thither."

He holds his crucifix to her and she kisses it reverently, and then he offers up a prayer for the departed spirit of her son.

The voiture stands waiting to go back to D—— next morning. There are no other passengers except the mother of Jacques. Mr. Martin has come to see her off, and he shakes her hand heartily as he places her in the voiture.

"Yours has been a weary sorrow, my friend, but you have borne it like a heroine."

The old eyes glisten even yet as she looks at him.

"Monsieur, my trouble might have been worse. My Jacques"—here the tears run over—"was always so strong, so manly! He would never be helped or waited on. He did all for me, and if he had lived he must have been, the Père says, a poor, helpless cripple, and the good God has spared him this torment. M'sieur, I must now go home and comfort the poor child who loved him. Adieu! my good m'sieur: I cannot thank you. Ah! if it had not been for you I should perhaps not have assisted at his burial. M'sieur, when I pray for benefactors I shall pray for you."

THE END.

LONDON: PRINTED BY W. CLOWES AND SONS, STAMFORD STREET
AND CHARING CROSS.